

# GHAZALI'S UNIQUE UNKNOWABLE GOD

A PHILOSOPHICAL CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF SOME OF THE  
PROBLEMS RAISED BY GHAZALI'S VIEW  
OF GOD AS UTTERLY UNIQUE AND UNKNOWABLE

BY

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LEIDEN  
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TO  
PHILIP K. HITTI  
AND  
WALTER T. STACE

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION . . . . .	1
I. GOD AS UTTERLY UNIQUE . . . . .	13
A. Preliminary Remarks on God's Uniqueness . . . . .	13
B. Two Interpretations of Divine Uniqueness . . . . .	14
C. Ways of Expressing Utter Difference . . . . .	17
D. Statement and Meaning of Utter Uniqueness . . . . .	18
E. Agnosticism and Mystical Union . . . . .	21
II. HOW IS MYSTICAL UNION POSSIBLE? . . . . .	23
A. The Question Clarified . . . . .	23
B. "Union" Taken Literally . . . . .	24
C. The Mystical Goal . . . . .	29
D. The Question Reformulated . . . . .	34
III. THE UNKNOWABLE ASPECT . . . . .	37
A. Preliminary . . . . .	37
B. God's Essence Is Unknowable . . . . .	40
IV. THE KNOWABLE ASPECT . . . . .	50
A. What the Knowable Aspect Is . . . . .	50
B. How God Is Known . . . . .	53
C. Mystical Knowledge . . . . .	58
D. Justification and Certainty . . . . .	72
E. Summary and Conclusion . . . . .	75
V. IS A METAPHYSICAL SOLUTION NECESSARY? . . . . .	78
A. Contradiction Noted . . . . .	78
B. Macdonald's Position . . . . .	80
C. Refutation of Macdonald's Contention . . . . .	87
D. Ghazali's Alternative Position . . . . .	90
VI. LIMITING AND TRANSCENDING THE LIMIT. . . . .	92
A. Summary and PREVIEW . . . . .	92
B. The Problem Stated . . . . .	93
C. On Uniqueness . . . . .	94
D. On Unknowability . . . . .	98
E. Conclusion . . . . .	100

VII. THE PROBLEM OF ATTRIBUTION . . . . .	101
A. Inadequacy of Attribution . . . . .	101
B. Function and Ground of Attribution . . . . .	103
C. The Final Aim of Attribution . . . . .	109
VIII. THE PROBLEM OF REVELATION . . . . .	115
A. The Believer and the Inadequate Picture of God . . . . .	115
B. Is Revelation Logically Possible? . . . . .	120
C. Concluding Summary . . . . .	126
BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . .	128
INDEXES . . . . .	131
I Arabic Terms . . . . .	131
II Proper Names . . . . .	131
III Subjects . . . . .	132

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## ABBREVIATIONS

In referring to Ghazali's works in the notes I have used the following abbreviations:

- Iḥ.* = *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm id-Dīn*  
*Arb.* = *Kitāb ul-Arba'in fi Uṣūl id-Dīn*  
*Il.* = *Iljām ul-'awāmm*  
*Im.* = *Kitāb ul-Imlā' 'an Isbkālāt il-Iḥyā'*  
*Iq.* = *al-Iqtisād fi l- P'tiqād*  
*Ma.* = *Ma'ārij ul-Quds fi Madārij Ma'rifat-in-Nafs*  
*Maḍ* = *Maḍnūn Bibi 'alā Gbairi Ablibi*  
*Maqā.* = *Maqāṣid ul-Falāsifab*  
*Maq.* = *al-Maqṣad ul-Asnā*  
*Misb.* = *Misbkāt ul-Anwār*  
*Miz.* = *Mizān ul-'amal*  
*Munq.* = *al-Munqidh min aḍ-Ḍalāl*  
*Rad.* = *ar-Radd ul-Jamīl*  
*Tab.* = *Tabāfut ul- Falāsifab*

## INTRODUCTION

### I

The view that the divine is unique and unknowable is not recent in the history of religious ideas, nor is it limited to any particular religion. Similarly, an awareness of the philosophic problems raised by such a view of the divine is to be found at different times in history and in more than one tradition of religious thought. However, it is in the Western philosophical tradition where the treatment of such problems has been most systematic and rigorous, reflecting in part the fullness and fearlessness with which some Western thinkers—by no means all—were willing to see and state the logical consequences of maintaining that the divine is utterly different and mysterious.

In Islam the doctrine of the uniqueness or utter difference (*mukhālafah*) of God, and the consequent view of the mystery or unknowability of His nature, are basic and explicit. While there is undoubtedly an awareness among Muslim thinkers, as well as among Western writers on Islam, of some of the philosophic problems posed by the conception of a unique unknowable God, there is no sustained systematic exploration of such problems, especially of the way in which that conception of God has logical bearing on the character of Islam as a theistic religion.

In our present undertaking we concern ourselves with some of these philosophical problems, all more or less familiar ones. But we raise and discuss them in terms of the thought system of one Muslim thinker, Abū-Hāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 1111 A. D.). Yet Ghazali's place in Islam is sufficiently important and representative that much of what will be said about him has Islamic application outside the confines of his thought.

We raise four related problems.

The first concerns the logical consistency of the very conception of an utterly unique and unknowable God. How is it possible to set such a limit to thinking without knowing what is beyond the limit and thus contradicting oneself?

The second problem arises when Ghazali maintains that man was created in the Image of God and that man must seek to become like Him as fully as possible. Ghazali also asserts explicitly that God is

knowable and that to know God is part of man's highest attainment. But how can man know God and become like Him if He is utterly unique and unknowable? How can God be unique yet comparable, unknowable yet knowable?

Thirdly we raise the problem of attribution at its most basic level. If God is unique and unknowable then how can one characterize God in any way, whether negatively or positively, and if one does, then on what possible grounds can such characterization be made?

The fourth problem is the problem of revelation. Despite Ghazali's assertions that God is knowable and despite his acceptance of some characterization of God, his final position is that the knowledge and the characterization are *inadequate*. The believer would find it very difficult to accept a characterization of God which is admittedly not indicative of His nature. Some special authoritative guarantee is needed to assure the believer that such acceptance is nonetheless a justifiable religious and intellectual act. Revelation is such a guarantee. But if God is unique and unknowable, is the concept of revelation logically possible?

Although the locus of the discussion of these problems is historical, the motivation in writing this essay and the manner of treatment are not to be called historical.

As to manner of treatment, the concern here is not with the development within Ghazali's thought, or within Islam, of any idea or doctrine. Although, particularly in the case of Ghazali, an internal developmental study of ideas would be useful.

Nor is our concern with any influences Ghazali, or Islam, may have suffered from Pagan, Hebrew, or Christian sources. Of course, if any such influences are relevant to our discussion, it is not intended that they be overlooked. This approach has its place in the study of ideas. The fear should be expressed, however, that on Islamic subjects this approach has been relatively overworked.

Furthermore, the prime purpose of this essay is not to establish, expound, or clarify Ghazali's ideas. However, some of this type of work has had to be done especially where it was needed for the systematic progress of our discussion. We have also dwelled on such establishing and clarification where we thought that some important idea, relevant to our discussion, has been generally neglected or not adequately grasped. Of course, it is not unlikely that in our own discussion the same sins have been committed. In any case, our study will have to shift back and forth between the level of what the ideas

are and the level of what to do with them in our attempt to resolve the philosophic problems we have raised.

At the former level we seek to properly emphasize the fact and analyze the nature of Ghazali's uncompromising view of the uniqueness and unknowability of God. Our analysis of Ghazali's position is based on relevant statements to be found primarily in his later works. In these his stand, particularly on the unknowability of God, is both more frequently expressed and more uncompromising. On the other hand, our portrayal of the uncompromising character of Ghazali's stand rests not only on his explicit later assertions, but also on what we have taken those assertions to imply. The fullness of a thinker's position is never confined to that thinker's explicit formulae. Unless one's aim is to paraphrase or summarize, some interpretative analysis seems to us inevitable. Undoubtedly, there are certain risks in even a limited or cautious interpretation. But interpretation and accuracy should not be looked upon as alternatives. The question should not be whether to interpret, or to avoid interpretation and aim for accuracy, but how sound is this or that interpretation. If we have erred in this regard it is hoped that others will take the same risks but do better.

We have placed great importance on his view of the uniqueness and unknowability of God. Ghazali himself did not spend much ink on this subject. Certainly his preoccupation is with the comparable and knowable aspect of God. To someone interested, let us say, primarily in expounding or summarizing Ghazali's thought it would seem unnatural for us to have so 'blown up' or 'overplayed' the negative concepts. Of course, neither the amount of ink, Ghazali's little or our much, nor any author's known preoccupation need be a test of the importance of an idea. Its importance depends on that for which it is considered important. We hope that as our discussion unfolds it will be seen that even for the purpose of an understanding of Ghazali's ideas on religious philosophy it is most fruitful to underscore and understand the nature of his conception of God as unique and unknowable. Such a conception to some extent lies philosophically inactive in Ghazali's thought as well as in the studies of his thought thus far undertaken. A philosophic activation of that conception, consisting in an analysis of its logical relation to some of the other aspects of his thought, not only incidentally clarifies those other aspects, but places them in a logically integrated and logically explained perspective.

The very nature of Ghazali's views on the comparability and know-

ability of God cannot be fully understood without an understanding of his conception of the uniqueness and unknowability of God, and of the logical relation that does, or could, exist between the negative and positive aspects. Thus in addition to our study of the negative aspect of God in Ghazali's thought we seek to explain the comparable and knowable aspect. We do this not only by studying that aspect in itself, in terms of Ghazalian texts referring to it—which has been the general practice among Ghazali writers—but against the aspect of uniqueness and unknowability. We are interested in finding out what Ghazali could mean in speaking of knowing and comparing God when God is said to be unique and unknowable. This seems to us to lead to a better understanding of the positive aspect of God.

Relatedly, we seek in this essay to elucidate and to show the importance to the rest of Ghazali's thought of his consciously and explicitly formulated philosophy of religious language. This, apart from its primary relevance in our problem solving goal, helps in an understanding of the kind of theism Ghazali's Islam is.

Finally, and still at the level of determining and clarifying Ghazali's thought, we give Ghazali's conception of the mystical goal (the terminus) a more analytical and more precise formulation than it has hitherto received. This is done in a special discussion of the concept of mystical union in Chapter Two, and in a discussion of mystical knowledge in Chapter Four.

The method or methods to use in seeking to clarify or understand a system of thought depends on what it is one wishes to clarify or understand about it. In other words "clarification" or "understanding" name more than one goal, or perhaps even, more than one level. It might make sense to speak of one method or of the best method for one kind of understanding. It makes no sense to advocate one method, say the developmental, or the comparative, or the philological or lexical, without any further specifications. To ask simply which is the best method often implies a conviction that there is only one legitimate objective. This reminds us of Ghazali's illustration about someone who asked: Which is better food or drink? Ghazali's sensible answer: It depends on whether one is hungry or thirsty. How many a criticism of the inadequacy of food comes from those who are set on quenching their thirst.

Furthermore, it is not uncommon to seek more than one kind of objective, although a single one may predominate. Consequently one often relies on more than one method. Some of these methods

are used in preparing for the written study without appearing in it, some used in the written study only, and some in both. Yet one method may predominate in either in so far as one objective does.

We have spoken of the determination and clarification of Ghazali's ideas. This is our secondary purpose. We distinguished it from our primary purpose which is to solve the problems posed for Ghazali's thought. We have also suggested that there is more than one kind or level of clarification or understanding. The primary or problem solving objective has clearly been called philosophical. We should now apply the same label to the kind or level of clarification which concerns us most of all. What we are interested in clarifying about Ghazali's ideas is their philosophical character because we are interested in their philosophical problem causing and problem solving potential. We can put it briefly, and in a way which combines both purposes and at the same time specifies what we mean by "philosophical" in this context. We are interested in the logical epistemological character of some of Ghazali's ideas and in the logical epistemological relations pertaining among them, regardless of whether Ghazali was aware of such character and of such relations. For this we have used a method which may be called by the blanket term philosophical critical analysis. What it is—and this need not be one thing—should become clear by observing its use in what follows.

More specifically we seek to show that the charge by some of Ghazali's critics that he is inconsistent in his views about the nature of God does not stand in the face of a critical analysis of Ghazali's contentions. Or, at least, that the critics have misjudged the location of the inconsistency. For we shall point out that the contradiction lies not in Ghazali's characterizing and comparing a unique unknowable God, but in entertaining a literal interpretation of the concept of revelation side by side with the negative conception of God. The positive characterization of God can be interpreted—according to Ghazali's own principles—in a way that avoids inconsistency without changing the character of Ghazali's thought or of Islam, theoretically considered. The same interpretation, however, cannot be made of the concept of revelation without violating a particular aspect of the historical character both of Ghazali's thought and of Islam—namely, that revelation literally describes an event between man and God. If this aspect of the historical character is to be retained then inconsistency is the price.

We also attempt to show that Ghazali could have solved the problem

of characterizing a unique unknowable God without the doctrine of any metaphysical 'link' between the finite and the infinite, such as is advocated in pantheism and the Christian doctrine of Incarnation. And, furthermore, that the doctrine of 'metaphysical linking' does not resolve the problem, since this problem is logical epistemological not metaphysical.

In the philosophical clarification of ideas and in the problem solving which we have undertaken, we have tried to use for our tools as many of Ghazali's own concepts and principles as possible. We have tried to show primarily how Ghazali himself, given some of his ideas and principles, might have clarified and solved, and also how far he could have. Ghazali has a fund of insights and principles which are quite useful in such clarification and problem solving. The value of these is not always seen by Ghazali partly because he was not aware of the problems in the form we have given them. In this case we have not hesitated with the help of some concepts and techniques in contemporary Western philosophy—often rather elementary ones—to use Ghazali's insights and principles to their full potential. We have found the relevant writings of Professor Walter Stace and of the Oxford Linguistic Philosophers particularly helpful in this respect.

We feel justified in injecting these tools of analysis into the study of Ghazali's thought on the ground that they do apply—at least, we maintain they do—in the way we choose to use them. To give a general illustration, a statement in Ghazali's time continues to be of the linguistic or logical type that it is or was intended to be even though its classification and the import of its classification are noted by others much later. People in the Middle Ages could have had some specific disease even though its proper diagnosis and treatment are of recent origin. The 'transplanting' of ideas and techniques in the study of systems of thought should be judged not by whether it is done, but by where and how used and in relation to which legitimate objective.

The locus of our study is historical. The method and objective of our study are philosophical, not historical. The philosophical clarification is our secondary objective, the philosophical problem solving is our primary objective. But both the clarification and the problem solving, the secondary and the primary objective, are our *immediate* objective. These are philosophical. But our *ultimate* objective, or it may be called our motivation, is not purely philosophical. We are in the end concerned with the vitality of Ghazali's ideas.

While this philosophical venture into a point in history is not in

the end purely philosophical, neither is it a purely archaeological expedition. The problems are philosophically live ones. Ghazali's answers to these problems may not prove original, but the spirit that moves some of his answers, and some of the principles on which they are based are crucial for the future of Islamic thought—perhaps for Islam generally. And although the present essay is not totally oriented to showing the relevance of Ghazali's ideas for the future of Islamic thought it is in view of this orientation that, in this essay, our interest in Ghazali lies.

At this point I wish to dissociate myself from a common attitude of mind manifested in discussions of this nature. Being a student of Western as well as Muslim culture and considering the Muslim tradition one of the traditions I claim as my own, I wish to avoid either defending Islam just for the sake of defending it, or engaging in a 'we have it in our culture' tooism. Both habits are an in advertent and *unwarranted* confession of cultural bankruptcy. If, therefore, in this essay I defend Ghazali, and I do on some points, or elicit from his thought principles that have independently played an important role in the Western philosophic tradition, it is not with the motivations just alluded to.

## II

While the problems we stated are not to be found in Islam in the specific form we have given them, and while one does not find any sustained attempt to deal with any of them as *philosophical* problems—and this applies as well to Western writers on Islam—yet some of them cannot be considered completely foreign to Muslim thinkers. A few brief words would suffice to show this point. These remarks will be in the nature of a classification of the typical positions taken on the problem of the relation between God's uniqueness and His Attributes not a discussion of any of them.

But first, this problem as it concerns us must be distinguished from another problem on the relation between God and His Attributes which seemed to have been the more engaging one for Muslim thinkers. Reference is made to the dispute started by the Mu'tazilites—the first group of thinkers in Islam of any substance—over whether a *number* of divine attributes destroys the *unity* of God. This problem also engaged the Muslim theologians and the philosophers. Its problematic character hinges on considering the divine attributes as a) entities, or pieces of metaphysical furniture, and b) as essential i.e.

attributes of God's Essence. Then to say that God has many attributes would introduce plurality into the divine nature. The problem for the Muslim thinkers became how to explain the relation of the attributes to God so that the divine *unity* is safeguarded. But we are not concerned here with how the attributes, one, seven, or ninety-nine fare with God's unity. We ask, rather—at least our basic question is—if God is utterly unique and unknowable how can anything at all be said about Him, and if anything is said, then on what grounds? In other words, our problem concerns the logic and epistemology of attribution not the theology of unitarianism.

As to the classification of positions in Islam, we note first that for Muslims the seeds for the view of the dual nature of God, like many a phenomenon in Muslim life and thought, are, immediately, at least, in the Qur'an. In the Qur'an Muhammad declares Allah, on the one hand, to be unlike anything.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, he speaks of Him lavishly in anthropomorphic terms—Allah is Mighty, Knower, Compassionate, Forgiver, etc., also He has hands, eyes, a face, and He sits on His Throne—and often in such metaphysical terms as the First, the Last, the Self-subsisting, the Originator.

In the development of Muslim thought Muhammad's insights take on the character of two tendencies, mutually exclusive at the hands of some, and existing together at the hands of others. The uniqueness-aspect of the concept of the divine appears in its pure and extreme form in the position known as *ta'fīl*<sup>2</sup> (lit. divesting). God is divested or stripped of all attributes, and we find Jahm ibn Ṣafwān (d. 745 A.D.) hesitating even to call God "a something", although according to Ibn Ḥazm (d. 1064 A.D.), he was not prepared to call Him nothing; hence the double negative, God is "not a not-anything".<sup>3</sup> This is probably as close as Islam has come in explicit formula to the Hindu characterization of the divine as nothingness. For him who takes *ta'fīl* as his stand the problem of the relation between the view of God as

<sup>1</sup> S xlii, 11

<sup>2</sup> The stronger term "*ibtāl*" (cessation, annihilation) is sometimes used. See "Tashbih", by R. Strothman, *E. I.*, Vol. IV, p. 686.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*. Despite the rather general practice of classifying Jahm as a *mu'aṭṭil* (one who holds to *ta'fīl*) there seems to be some difference of opinion on this classification. (*Ibidem*). In the article on Jahm (Djahm) in *E. I.* (unsigned) one reads that Jahm "only allowed that God is All-powerful and the Creator because these are things which cannot be predicated of any created being". Whatever is true of Jahm in particular would not upset our point about *ta'fīl* as one extreme position in Islam as regards divine attribution.

essentially above characterization and the one in which God is given characterization, does not arise, although the second of our problems—namely, whether declaring God unique and unknowable (as a *mu'aṭṭil* would have to do) is not self-refuting, might be raised.

At the opposite pole are those who accept some characterization of God. They may be said to believe in *tashbih* or affirmation of attributes, and may be divided broadly into two groups. a) Those who either explicitly or implicitly deny the uniqueness of God and accept the anthropomorphic attributes literally, i.e. they take the position known as *tashbih* or comparing, and b) those who maintain that God is different from other things although man may say that He is such and such.

When the *tashbih*, or comparing, of the first group involves parts of the human body or *jism* then the position is *tajsīm*.<sup>1</sup> The Karrāmites are said to have taken this crude stand,<sup>2</sup> also the Zāhirites and the extreme Hanbalites.<sup>3</sup> Of course, there are variations within this broad classification and these appear in the degree to which the thinker is prepared to *interpret* (a practice known as *ta'wil*) the physical references to God.<sup>4</sup> *Tashbih*, or comparing, taken literally and held without the belief in God's uniqueness offers no problem of inconsistency.

The majority of Muslim thinkers have avoided both the extreme of *ta'fīl*, or divesting God of any attributes, and the literal anthropomorphism of *tashbih*. The first extreme while it preserves God's uniqueness (and unity) leaves God utterly nude, so to speak, which is hard on a religious believer. The second extreme, *tashbih*, certainly makes God knowable and 'available' for worship but it destroys His uniqueness. The position of most Muslim thinkers is a compromise, a position which affirms that God has attributes but that these attributes are *different from* (hence *mukhālafah*) their counterpart in the world of man. The same position may be described as an attempt to *purify God or lift Him above* likeness to man and his world, without

<sup>1</sup> Strothman (*Op. cit.*, p. 687) cautions that at least in the case of Hishām b. al-Ḥakam who maintained that God's body is not like ours, *tajsīm* cannot be treated simply as a crude form of *tashbih*. We have treated it as such since this seems to be generally the case.

<sup>2</sup> Ghazali, *Mish.*, p. 94.

<sup>3</sup> Gairdner, "Introduction" to his translation of *Mish.*, p. 6.

<sup>4</sup> For example, according to Ghazali there are "those who denied to Allah corporeality and all its accidentia, except one, *direction*, and that *direction upwards*..." (*Mish.*, p. 94; italics in Gairdner's translation.) In the introduction to his translation of the *Mishkāt* Gairdner identifies these as Ibn Ḥanbal and his followers; (p. 6). See also *Ib. I.*, *faṣl 2*, p. 92.

denying that He has attributes. Expressed in these terms the position is known as *tanzih*.

The Mu'tazilites and the Aristotelian-Neoplatonic philosophers both have recognized *some* attributes<sup>1</sup> but have contended that God is nonetheless unlike other things. What they permitted were mostly attributes relating to God's metaphysical status such as Creator (Mu'tazilites), First Cause, Necessary Existent (Philosophers), and the like.

The Sufis (Islamic mystics) generally have emphasized the aspect of God which is characterizable in human terms but not without a sense of the inadequacy of such words. A strain of agnosticism runs beneath their exaltations and ecstatic utterances. The sufi theorists, or those who have sought to work out mystical insights into formal metaphysics (pantheistic as a rule) and who have been influenced by the Neoplatonic doctrine of emanation, echoed the juxtaposition of the God above characterization and the characterizable God in the metaphysical terms of the infinite One who—or which—appears in the finite many. Ibn ul'Arabī (d. 1240 A.D.), for example, in whom Sufi theory reaches its peak, speaks of the infinite God whose veil is phenomenal existence, and “phenomenal existence, is but the concealment of His existence in His oneness without any attribute”.<sup>2</sup> This might be taken as representative of the pantheism in Islamic thought.

The last group of thinkers in Islam to which reference must be made in this brief classification are the Orthodox Theologians. They, above all, have formulated the compromise doctrine in terms of *mukbālafab* and *tanzih*. The majority of believers accepted al-Ash'ari's (d. 935 A.D.) formula that God has attributes but—as against the Mu'tazilites and the Philosophers—that these attributes are not identical with God's Essence nor are they distinct from His Essence. They are nonetheless God's attributes, they have been used in the Qur'ān, they are not like man's attributes, and they must be accepted by the believer as such. The usual orthodox formula used by Ibn Hanbal (d. 855 A. D.) and after him by al-Ash'ari is that these attributes may be applied to God “*bila kayfa wala tashbih*” i.e. without asking how and without comparing.

<sup>1</sup> Nyberg, H. S. “al-Mu'tazila,” *E. I.*, Vol. III, p. 791.

<sup>2</sup> From *Kitāb ul-Ajwibab*; quoted in Smith, Margaret, *Readings from the Mystics of Islam*, Luzac, p. 99.

All these groups, the Mu'tazilites, the Philosophers, the Sufis, the Sufi theorists, and the Orthodox Theologians—all take a mid-way position between the extremes of *ta'fil* or divesting and literal *tashbih*, or comparing. All in some way and to some extent accept the combination of a God beyond characterization and some characterization of that same God. There are differences, of course, as to what characterization is accepted and the way in which that characterization is thought to be related to the unique God.

Although as we remarked earlier there is no sustained attempt to treat the problem of the logic and epistemology of characterizing a unique unknowable God, nonetheless suggestions are to be found within Islam which could be considered as candidates for solution even though they are not all satisfactory. We can see three such possible solutions.

The first suggestion may be a resort to the Qur'ān as an Authority. The Qur'ān has declared God unlike any other thing and the same Qur'ān gave the attributes in terms of which God may be characterized. These must be authoritative, they must be accepted without questions (on faith). This is implied in the position of most orthodox theologians including Ghazali.

The second suggestion is that the attribute-statements as they apply to God are not descriptive of His nature. These statements are interpreted variously but always in some non-literal non-descriptive manner. This is hinted at by al-Ash'ari but more clearly and explicitly expressed by Ghazali and by other Islamic thinkers such as al-Fārābī (d. ca. 950 A.D.), Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna; d. 1037 A.D.) and Ibn Rushd Averroes; d. 1198 A.D.).

The third possibility is pantheism in which the Oneness of all things is supposed to bridge the gap between the infinite that is above characterization and the characterizable finite many which are nonetheless the One. This suggestion is considered as a possible solution by a non-Muslim writer on Islam, as we shall see.

The first suggestion may be religiously satisfying but is philosophically inadequate. For to be assured that the attribution is authoritative does not in any way show how that attribution is logically possible.

The third possibility offers a metaphysical solution to an essentially logical problem. It merely begs the issue, for to say that the gap is bridged since the finite and the infinite are one is to avoid saying how

the finite and the infinite *can* be one. Both these unsatisfactory suggestions will be discussed more fully in due course.

It is the second suggestion which holds the greatest promise, and we intend in this essay to make a full exploration and exploitation of the possibilities and limitations of that suggestion.

## CHAPTER ONE GOD AS UTTERLY UNIQUE

### A. PRELIMINARY REMARKS ON GOD'S UNIQUENESS

Ordinarily when we speak of something as unique we mean—apart from the honorific or even derogatory connotations sometimes intended—that within a certain frame of reference only that thing has one or more specified characteristics. Thus, for example, a child born with green hair would be unique in this respect among children if no other child had green hair.

When we speak of God as unique we essentially retain this ordinary meaning, for within a certain frame of reference (which in this case is all things) only God is said to possess some specified characteristics, or is said to possess certain characteristics in a manner or to a degree that is peculiar to Him alone. But God's uniqueness differs from the uniqueness of other things in a few important respects. It will be convenient for purposes of presentation and for the sake of emphasis to note these differences first independently of Ghazali's thought. It will be apparent shortly that what we shall say now in distinguishing God's uniqueness is properly applicable to Ghazali's thought.

1. God is unique in *every* respect. All other things are unique only in some. The same point may be expressed by using negatives. There is no respect in which God is not unique, whereas in the case of all other things none is unique in every respect. The child with the green hair is most likely not unique in his general biological constitution or in much of his behaviour, and so forth. God is unique in any and all of His characteristics.

2. Of course, there is a sense in which anything may be considered unique in each of its characteristics, for each such characteristic is self-identical. No matter how similar two instances of the same shade of red are—and let us assume now that they have absolutely the same nuance of shading—still they are two instances of that shade of red. Each is unique in at least its spatio-temporal relations. As a matter of fact, any *individual identity* is unique whether that be a simple



quality like a shade of red, or a complex unit of qualities that make up an object. By being itself and not another every identity is unique in whatever makes it an identity distinct from another. And to say this is to utter a tautology.

God may be called unique in this sense, but so would this pencil, that pencil, this building, this town etc. And if there are many gods each would be unique in being a particular identity, itself alone answering to a particular complex description. Furthermore, not only is this application of the term "unique" not peculiar to God, it applies to whatever it does when that thing is considered as *an identity* in the abstract regardless of *what* it happens to be. In discussing the uniqueness of God all the applications of that term to Him derive from His being the *particular* identity He is.

3. In the case of things other than God a thing may be unique within one frame of reference but cease to be unique when the frame of reference or class is altered. For instance, returning to our example of the child with green hair, this characteristic may be very common among the offspring of some animals other than man. The child who was unique among humans is not unique if now the whole animal kingdom is taken as the frame of reference. Uniqueness here is contingent upon a frame of reference of varying extension. God's uniqueness pertains no matter what the frame of reference.

4. It is possible, however, that of all existing things that can be said to have hair, only this new-born child has green hair. In this case that child is utterly unique in having that colour hair. But it is not impossible for future new-borns of any species to have green hair. Thus the peculiarity is an empirical accident. God's uniqueness, on the other hand, is necessary and follows from the very notion of God. It would be logically impossible for God not to be unique.

Thus God is unique in every respect, no matter what the frame of reference. This uniqueness is not an empirical accident but is implied by the notion of God. One might add that only God is unique in all these particular ways.

## B. TWO INTERPRETATIONS OF DIVINE UNIQUENESS

We have distinguished between uniqueness that applies to God from uniqueness which applies to things other than God. Two people may accept the points of the last section and yet, taking God's

uniqueness in itself, would give it two interpretations. At the beginning of the chapter we defined the general concept of uniqueness as the exclusive possession of one characteristic or more within a specified frame of reference. The same point can be stated in terms of the concept of difference. Thus we call a thing unique if it is different in certain respects from all the other members of a class. God's uniqueness in relation to other things is a difference from other things. This takes two interpretations. One interpretation of this difference is that God's attributes are different from those of other things, specifically man's in *degree* only. God's attributes are to some extent like man's only they are *greater* and *more perfect*. The other interpretation is that God's uniqueness is an expression of the *utter difference*<sup>1</sup> of His nature from all other things. The student of Ghazali can find in his writings some statements which imply the first view but Ghazali's real position unmistakably is that God is utterly different.<sup>2</sup>

### *Greater and More Perfect*

In commenting on the fact that man can't help understanding except in terms of what is familiar to him—so that one understands God's knowledge and power in terms of human knowledge and power,

<sup>1</sup> The term brings to mind Otto's "wholly other" (*The Idea of the Holy*) and Stace's "utterly other" (*Time and Eternity*). It may be said that all three terms express basically the same thing, although the "utter" in Ghazali's phrase is more uncompromising. Otto, it may be recalled, admits some similarity between what the concept designates and the numinous of which it is used. In this respect Ghazali is closer to Stace although here again Ghazali is more uncompromising than Stace, for the latter maintains that the divine may be experienced in mystical intuition and it is only to the conceptual intellect that the divine is barred. For Ghazali, as we shall see, God is barred to both intellect and intuition.

<sup>2</sup> There is what seems to be a third interpretation of God's uniqueness, or difference, implicit in some of Ghazali's statements. For example, God's choice is said to differ from man's in the manner of its exercise. God chooses without hesitation (*Ib.* IV, 5, *shatr* 1, 2nd *bayan*, p. 220), without a before and an after (*Arb.*, p. 6), etc... This would seem at first to be neither a difference of degree nor an utter difference. Actually it could be assimilated under difference of degree, not in choice as such, but in the perfection of choice. God's attributes are free from whatever constitutes or implies the limitations of their human status. One is left to believe that otherwise the human and the divine attributes are alike. But then this becomes the view that God's attributes are like man's only more perfect.

In the end it is possible that even the latter view could be turned into that of utter difference. For the more human specifications are removed from the divine attributes the less will they be like their human counterparts in anything but the name.

just as a young boy would understand the pleasures of sexual union, if these were mentioned to him. in terms of the pleasures of eating—in commenting on this Ghazali says:

”The difference between God’s knowledge and power and the knowledge and power of human creatures is *greater than* the difference between the pleasures of sexual union and those of eating.”<sup>1</sup>

This implies that the difference is one of degree.

As if to specify further the nature of this difference he refers shortly after that to God’s attributes as “nobler and more perfect”,<sup>2</sup> again implying that the difference is one of degree, of perfection this time.

God’s uniqueness under this interpretation would be conceived as follows. Let us take some particular attribute like power or kindness. If these are mentioned without any further qualifications, then God may be said to belong to the same class of kind and powerful beings as man. So far it seems that God’s uniqueness is denied. But suppose we make the intention of the class more specific and hence more restrictive. Among men it is possible to subdivide the class of kind men into those who are not very kind (which may mean seldom kind, or kind in a small way regardless of how often) and those who are very kind (always and/or in a big way). But no man even approaches the kindness of God, for He is infinitely and perfectly kind in every way. Therefore, when specifications like infinity and perfection are introduced into the class of kind beings it subdivides, and God becomes the sole member of the sub-class of *infinitely* and *perfectly* kind beings. *Only God* is infinitely and perfectly kind, and the difference between God and man, on the one hand, and two men of varying degrees of kindness on the other, is so great that the two men may be said to belong to the same sub-class vis-a-vis God’s kindness. The same account would be given of each of God’s attributes. Thus God would be unique in every respect, but in the manner just explained.

Such would be the view implied by the Ghazali quotations just given. But passages like these are rare, and in the face of overwhelming support for the doctrine of the utter difference of God’s nature they could perhaps be explained away as due to a religious zeal intended to give due praise to God whenever “the vulgar” incline towards a crude similarity or comparison between man and God. Ghazali may be imagined saying: “It shall not be thought that the divine attributes

<sup>1</sup> *Ib.*, I, 2, *faṣl* 2, p. 89; my italics.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem.*

are like their human counterparts (may God be above that). His are nobler and more perfect”.

Let us now turn to Ghazali’s view of God as utterly different.

### C. WAYS OF EXPRESSING UTTER DIFFERENCE

1. One way in which Ghazali expresses God’s utter uniqueness or utter difference is by saying that there can be no class to which God could belong<sup>1</sup> lest God be considered one of a kind instead of the only one of His kind.

“He is above (*munazzabun ‘an*) having a genus (*jins*) and a differentia (*faṣl*), for what does not share (a genus) with others has no differentia to separate it from anything else.”<sup>2</sup>

2. Another way in which such uniqueness is expressed is more explicit. God is simply declared to be unlike anything.

“He is not like anything nor is anything like Him”.<sup>3</sup> This fact we are told “is known to both Law and Reason”.<sup>4</sup>

This same thought is expressed in more specific terms by using the distinction between essence and attribute, and by placing God as Creator against created things, instead of the usual “anything” or “all other things”.

“His attributes are unlike those of any creature just as His Essence unlike the essence of any created thing.”<sup>5</sup>

It must be made clear that this difference (*mukhālafab*) is an utter or absolute difference.

“...(one must) deny similarity (between God and other things) absolutely (*aṣlan*).”<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Of course Allah can belong to the class of “all that was talked about last Friday at Azhar University”, or “all those whose name in English starts with the the letter ‘G’ ” etc. But these classes do not help us understand what the word “God” stands for and therefore are irrelevant as well as trivial. The same is true of God’s membership in that least restrictive class of “all that in some sense is”, for that also is of no use to us if we were trying to guide someone as to when to use the word “God”.

<sup>2</sup> *Ma.*, p. 193.

<sup>3</sup> *Ib.* I. 2, *faṣl* 3, *rukn* 1, p. 95.

<sup>4</sup> *Maq.*, p. 18.

<sup>5</sup> *Arb.*, p. 18.

<sup>6</sup> *Maq.*, p. 21.

Speaking of one particular attribute, knowledge, but in the context clearly talking about all, Ghazali says:

“And God’s knowledge is absolutely unlike that of His creatures.”<sup>1</sup>

3. A third way, is in saying of such divine attributes as living, knowing etc. . . that

“These Names are like the corresponding attributes of Adam (i.e. man) in name only, the uttered word...”<sup>2</sup>

4. Undoubtedly the most common way in which Ghazali expresses God’s utter uniqueness or utter difference is by declaring Him to be above (*munazzahun* or *muqaddasun ‘an*) any attribute that the human mind can conceive. God is

“...above their (most<sup>3</sup> men’s) attributes of perfection just as He is above their attributes of imperfection, nay of every attribute conceivable by man, as well as of what is like it (the attribute) or similar to it.”<sup>4</sup>

And since man, according to Ghazali, uses words that have meaning only in terms of what is familiar to him, God’s being above human characterization means that He cannot be like anything that man knows or can know.

It should be evident then that for Ghazali God’s uniqueness is an utter difference of nature and not the accumulated differences of degree in this, that and the other respect. It should also be clear that the doctrine is Ghazalian beyond doubt.

#### D. STATEMENT AND MEANING OF UTTER UNIQUENESS

##### *Uniqueness in Any Particular Attribute*

1. God’s claim to uniqueness may be some specific characteristic that no other existing thing has. If one special characteristic were to

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>2</sup> Margin *Ib.* I, p. 138 and 139. (*Faṣl “Ma’na ifshā’ sirr r-rubūbiyyah kufr”*). A Name is an attribute-name or attribute-word which has been given to God as a proper name, in the Qur’ān or in the Prophetic Oral Tradition. All divine Names (except “Allah”) are attribute-words but the converse is false.

<sup>3</sup> In speaking of *most* men Ghazali does not imply that the attributes which the *rest* of men conceive are applicable, rather that most men think of God crudely in their own terms, whereas the rest (“the Few of the Few”) know that this is false.

<sup>4</sup> *Maq.*, p. 29.

be selected by Ghazali, one that above all else marks God off from the rest of things, this would be necessary existence.<sup>1</sup> This, God’s special characteristic (*khāṣṣiyah*) entitles Him to a special status in the scheme of things and separates Him as a *kind* of being unlike any other. All being is divided into contingent or dependent (*tābi‘*) existence and necessary existence (*wājib al-wujūd* or *matbū‘*), that which stands in need of another in order to exist and that which does not. In other words, existence is of two kinds, and the word “existence” (“*wujūd*”) cannot be used in the same sense of both.<sup>2</sup>

2. One can single out other characteristics, non-metaphysical or not strictly metaphysical, which also apply to God alone, and therefore He would be unique in respect to each one. In this category we have attributes which are expressed in a verbal form reserved to God alone, e.g., the word “*rahmān*” (The Merciful). According to Ghazali the word designates God’s Mercy and Kindness in bringing man into being, in guiding him towards faith and happiness, in making him blessed in the life to come, and in permitting him to gaze into His Countenance.<sup>3</sup>

3. But God’s uniqueness is not confined to metaphysical characteristics not possible to other things, or to attributes whose verbal form of expression is reserved for God. He is also unique with respect to those attributes the words for which are identical in form in both the divine and the non-divine contexts.<sup>4</sup> Both God and man may be called powerful, kind, knowing, etc. . . , but the meaning of the words is not the same. And, as we shall see, humans are limited to knowing their meaning in the human context only.

Thus God is unique with respect to *any particular attribute*: Whether it be one that applies to God alone by designating His unshared metaphysical status, or one that is reserved to God due to the verbal form in which it is expressed, or, finally, one the verbal form of which but not the meaning applies to other than God.

<sup>1</sup> God’s necessary existence is His independence from being caused (See Ch. III, p. 41 ff). This is complemented by the dependence of things upon Him as cause. The latter aspect, His creative agency, is sometimes called *qudrat* (power). However, this word is inadequate since no words can express God’s relation to the world. (*Ib.* IV, 2, *Shahr* 2, *rukn* 1, 4th *bayān*, p. 83.

<sup>2</sup> *Ib.* IV, 6, 10th *bayān*, p. 281. Other names for this unique metaphysical status are: The Real (*al-Haqq*) and The Self-Subsisting (*al-Qayūm*).

<sup>3</sup> *Maq.*, p. 26.

<sup>4</sup> See note 2, p. 110.

*The "Utter" in "Utterly Unique"*

Earlier in this chapter we made some general remarks on God's uniqueness. We shall recall these points now and see how they apply to Ghazali's thought as it has thus far been uncovered. The discussion will now emphasize the word "utter" in "utterly unique".

We may distinguish four senses in which God is called utterly unique.

1. Absolutely the Only One. If uniqueness is in respect of some particular attribute, then for God to be *utterly* unique with regard to that attribute means that *of all things only He has that attribute*. The frame of reference is always of the widest possible extension, and therefore God is *absolutely the only one* who has the specified attribute.

The clearest illustration of this in Ghazali's thought is necessary existence. God is absolutely the only one whose existence is necessary. The existence of everything else is dependent.

2. Necessarily Unique. Furthermore, God will always be unique, of necessity, and not as an empirical accident. The statement 'God's existence is necessary' is analytic. It is true by definition. By calling necessary existence a *khāṣṣiyah*<sup>1</sup> (a differentiating characteristic) Ghazali implies that it is a defining characteristic. To say then that God is utterly unique in this second sense could mean that it is *logically impossible* for God not to be unique in the specified respect.

3. Absolutely Unlike. In another sense, God may be called utterly unique also with respect to some particular attribute, only in this case the attribute-word applies in its identical form<sup>2</sup> to God and to other than God. Thus both God and man may be called powerful, but God is utterly unique with respect to the attribute of power, and this means that He is *utterly different* in that respect. In other words, the verbal expression is shared but not the meaning. From our discussion of Ghazali's interpretation of utter difference it is clear that what is meant is that God is *absolutely unlike* anything in any particular respect.

<sup>1</sup> *Maq.*, p. 18.

<sup>2</sup> The case of attributes the verbal form of which is reserved to God is reducible to this one, for the elements of that attribute are terms applicable to the world of man. For example, *rahmān* is *rahmah* (mercy) expressed by God in helping man towards salvation (*Maq.*, 26). It is a kind of *rahmah* differing in the uses it is put to, and it happens that only God can manifest *rahmah* for that purpose. But even as a kind of *rahmah* it cannot be like man's *rahmah*. As is the case with such attributes: The words are the same but not their meaning.

4. Unique in Total Nature. The fourth and most important sense of God's *utter* uniqueness is that God is unique in *all* respects pertaining to His nature. This sense and the previous one may be clarified by distinguishing the two senses of the ambiguous phrase "completely different" (which should be considered an equivalent of the phrase "utterly unique"). God is completely (or utterly) different in that the *difference* is complete. There is not the slightest similarity between Him and other things. This is the third sense of utter uniqueness discussed above. On the other hand God is completely different in that His difference is complete as far as the number of aspects on which He is compared. He is different not only in a few respects but in all respects. His *total nature* is absolutely unlike anything. This is the fourth sense of *utterly* unique.

It should not seem that God as a divine being is utterly unique by the accumulation of utter uniqueness in this, that, and the other respect. Rather, He is unique in His total nature, and because of this He is unique in any particular respect. What Ghazali has in mind is that God belongs to a *unique category of Being*, the divine (*lāhūt*), which has certain

"...attributes and other prerogatives proper to it *qua divine* which distinguish it from other things."<sup>1</sup>

If this unique category of Being were to be looked upon as a class then it could (logically) have only one member. This is the point where God as unique (*ahad*) and God as one (*wāḥid*) intersect.

## E. AGNOSTICISM AND MYSTICAL UNION

From all the foregoing, one important consequence has to be drawn.

*God is Utterly Unknowable*

If God is a unique kind of being unlike any other being in any respect, more specifically, unlike anything known to man, it would

<sup>1</sup> *Rad.* p. 29; my italics. This brings to mind Otto's treatment of the divine as a unique category. For Ghazali God is considered a unique sort of 'thing' which defies classification, but the concept of the *category* is not explicitly and formally applied by him. However, the concept of *lāhūt* (divinity), usually contrasted in Islam, especially by al-Ḥallāj, (Nicholson, *Studies in Islamic Mysticism*, Cambridge University Press, p. 80) with *nāsūt* (humanity), does invite the application of the term "category".

have to follow by Ghazali's own principles that *God is utterly unknowable*. For, according to Ghazali, things are known by their likenesses,<sup>1</sup> and what is utterly unlike what is known to man cannot be known. Furthermore, God would have to be unknowable, completely unknowable, not only to 'the man in the street', but to prophets and mystics as well. This is a conclusion that Ghazali states very explicitly and not infrequently. It is also a view that is often stated independently of its logical relation to God's utter uniqueness.

Now, if God is utterly unique and utterly unknowable then the problems raised in our introduction will have to be faced and resolved.

### *Mystical Union*

Let us seek entry to the discussion of these problems by asking first of all one particular question. If God is utterly unique and unknowable then how is *mystical union* possible? Is there no incompatibility between the mystic's goal and the concept of God as utterly unique and unknowable? We shall see that this question reduces itself to a set of clearer and more manageable questions which are not exclusively related to mystical union. Specifically, it reduces itself to the questions that constitute the second problem of this essay—namely, how can man become like God, and how can man know God, if God is utterly unique and unknowable? Since, then, in the last analysis, the problem of the relation between mystical union and Ghazali's God as thus far depicted does not constitute a problem different from one of the four we have stated, it may seem unjustified to devote space to discussing it independently.

However, it is not readily clear that the question of the possibility of mystical union is reducible to our second problem. An analysis is needed to show this.

Moreover, it is usually maintained in mystical literature that God, inaccessible as He may be to ordinary believers and to ordinary human faculties, is nonetheless supremely accessible to the mystic. The mystic, if anyone does, achieves a cognitive, affective, unitive relation with God. It is necessary, therefore, to make a (brief) study of Ghazali's concept of mystical union in order to put God's utter uniqueness and unknowability to its supreme test.

<sup>1</sup> *Maq*, p. 8.

## CHAPTER TWO

### HOW IS MYSTICAL UNION POSSIBLE?

"Attributeless and predicateless though the divine Being is, the mystics nevertheless make their inexplicable journey to IT, and gaze upon ITS face."

W. H. T. Gairdner  
*Der Islam*, V, 1914, p. 132-133.

"...how can this Unknowable, Unimaginable, and Inconceivable be nevertheless 'reached' by mystic souls?"

W. H. T. Gairdner  
Introduction to *Mishkāt al-Anwār*,  
(London, 1924), p. 9.

#### A. THE QUESTION CLARIFIED

If God is unique and unknowable how *could* man attain mystical union with Him (or It)? Is such a relation—or any other religious relation—possible?

One thing that one could be doubting in asking 'Is mystical union possible?', is whether, God being unique and unknowable, man would be *motivated* to seek union with Him. This would be doubting the possibility of mystical union by doubting that *desire for it* is possible, namely, whether in the light of our knowledge of human need and motivation such a desire would arise. The same could be asked of other religious relations like prayer and worship. What in an utterly other and unknowable God would make anyone worship and pray to Him (or It)? What would that meek woman kneeling in prayer before the altar of her incomprehensible God say? What would take her there in the first place? It is a familiar remark by writers on religion and religious history that any view of the nature of God that pictures Him as unknowable or 'aloof' cannot become the basis of a permanent popular religion.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> It is with this fact in mind that D. B. Macdonald, in commenting on the "aloof" God of Muslim theologians—Ghazali included—declares (adapting a formula) "It is magnificent, but it is not—religion!" (*Hartford Seminary Record*, Vol. xx, No. 1, p. 36). And this is perhaps what makes Cleanthes in Hume's *Dialogues* tell Demea, "Thus..., if we abandon all human analogy..., I am afraid we abandon all religion and retain no conception of the great object of our adoration." (Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Hafner, p. 71.)

It is certainly safe to grant this point about popular religion, but it is not impossible, either logically or empirically, for man to desire a unique unknowable God. It is not unlikely that the very mystery is enchanting, and the thought of that God having the least touch of familiarity could be repelling.<sup>1</sup> At any rate the prior and, for our purposes, more important problem lies in a different interpretation of the question of this chapter.

In another interpretation the question would be about the possibility of mystical union itself as a relation between man and God. The previous interpretation concerned the possibility of *desire* for such a relation. Here again, in asking whether mystical union is possible, two versions are possible. Let us call them the factual and the logical versions.

According to the factual version one may be doubting whether such a relation could actually be attained, i.e. whether there is anything about a unique and unknowable God that would in fact prevent mystical union from coming to pass the way moisture prevents adhesive tape from sticking.

However, the logical version is prior and deserves our primary consideration, for if the relation is logically impossible then it would be also factually impossible. The logical version concerns the incompatibility between the notion of God as utterly unique and unknowable and the notion of mystical union. Here again the matter cannot be settled without our being clear first of all about what mystical union is. However, we may anticipate the development of this chapter and say that mystical union is a relation with what Ghazali takes to be the *knowable aspect* of God. The problem will thus ultimately reduce itself to a possible logical incompatibility between two aspects of the divine nature.

#### B. "UNION" TAKEN LITERALLY

"Mystical union" refers to a relation between man and God. The union is the climax of a journey of spiritual and moral self-purification for the mystic. But what is it that happens then? Does "mystical union"

<sup>1</sup> See in this connection Chapter One of Stace's *Time and Eternity*.

denote an event, perhaps a sudden one like tripping or turning red in the face? Or is the term a way of talking about several phenomena? Is the word "union" used literally as when one speaks of the merging of two substances, or is it a metaphor? And if so what does it mean?

#### *Union of Any Two Identities*

Let us take the word "union" in its literal sense and ask what it means to speak of two things, say two coins, as having become one. Whether the two were welded together or melted and recoined, to say that they have become one means that at one point the criteria for applying the label "one coin" were fulfilled by each of two entities. After the change only one set of conditions claims such a label. "Two coins" no longer has any denotation. This case of becoming one is empirically possible and we know it to happen. Ghazali would describe it as a case of two things becoming a third thing<sup>1</sup> in order to distinguish it from a sense of "becoming one" which means simply that one thing becomes the other. The latter interpretation describes a logically impossible situation. What we are saying here is that A becomes B while remaining A, or B becomes A while remaining B. One could also describe it by saying that two things as two are now one with little or no change in the identity of either. This must be what Ghazali has in mind when he declares

"The words of those who say that the servant has become one with his Lord are self-contradictory... (for) to say that one thing becomes another is absolutely impossible."<sup>2</sup>

And he argues as follows.

At the moment of identification (*ittihād*) there can only be four possibilities:

1. Both A and B exist; in this case they cannot be identical, and we are acknowledging that they are two and not one. If A and B happen to be two qualities residing in the same subject then they have the same locus but the qualities themselves are still two different ones.<sup>3</sup>

2. The second possibility is that neither A nor B exist (as A and B), but then they have not become identical; each has lost its former

<sup>1</sup> *Maq.*, p. 74.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*.

identity. Ghazali must have in mind here the case of two things merging together to form a third—as illustrated by our example of the two coins. All he says about this entire second point is:

“And if they are annihilated then they have not become identical but have ceased to be and perhaps the product is a third thing.”<sup>1</sup>

3. and 4. Finally, either A or B does not exist while the other does, but then how can an existent become identical with a non-existent?<sup>2</sup>

Thus “mystical union” taken literally cannot mean the identification of two separate identities while each retaining its numerical separateness. This is *logically* impossible. The conclusion, it must be noted, affects God and man not as divine and human but simply as *two* distinct identities and would be true of *any* two identities, God and man or arsenic and old lace.

#### *Union of Divine and Human*

Suppose now, keeping the word “union” in its literal sense we ask whether it is possible for God and man to become one, either (a) by forming a third unit composed of both, or (b) by a transformation on the part of one, the mystic, so that he loses his humanity and becomes divine. Both are cases of God sharing His essence with an other; the first according to Ghazali is the Christian Incarnation, the second is the mystic’s supposed union with God. Ghazali’s answer to each is that this is not possible. We shall proceed to see why and in what sense.

In answer to the Christian Ghazali has written a book—this is apart from remarks in other writings—entitled *The Excellent Refutation of the Divinity of Jesus by the Explicit Text of the Gospels*. It is not our intention here to dwell on the refutation of *ḥulūl* (inherence or incarnation) since we are concerned primarily with mystical union, but a few words on that subject would be relevant since it is a kindred type of identification.

In the above-mentioned book Ghazali’s ‘tactics’ are of three kinds.

1. He produces biblical texts<sup>3</sup> that explicitly or implicitly acknow-

<sup>1</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>3</sup> Ghazali’s acquaintance with the Bible is commendable. It is a proof of the oft repeated statement about his ‘Aquinian’ stature in Islam, having to an extent assimilated and synthesized the learning of his time. But it is still true to say that Ghazali, like other Islamic writers who have discussed Christianity, does not show a “‘feel’ for the Christian position”, as Smith maintains. See Smith, W.C. *Islam in Modern History*, Princeton University Press, p. 104, n. 11.

ledge that God and Jesus are not one but separate. This is the declared intention of the title of the book. But he also resorts to two other techniques.

2. He explains away as metaphorical all verses—especially ones from St. John—which speak of Jesus and God as one.

3. Finally, and this is what ties in with our present discussion, he argues, and he argues in two general ways:

(a) By direct appeal to the principle of self-contradiction. Take one example. According to one Christian sect, the Jacobites, whose views he presents and criticizes, God created the humanity in Jesus and then appeared united with it. The result is a third reality unlike either of its components for it is qualified by all the attributes of divinity *as well as* all the attributes of humanity. But if something has the attributes of humanity then it is human; how can it also be not human?<sup>1</sup>

(b) By appeal to the nature of the divine and denying what is incompatible with it as divine. This is an indirect appeal to the principle of self-contradiction. Here is another example, also from the section on the Jacobites.

If God were a perfect God He would have the attributes of such a God, and one of the attributes of a Perfect God is that He can never be in such a position that His existence would in any way have to depend on something else. Clearly this combined reality, the God-in-Jesus, depends on the existence of its components, and each part would in its status as a part be lacking and dependent on the completing part.<sup>2</sup> Thus it would be self-contradictory to say that a necessary existent is a dependent existent.

But underlying these specific criticisms is a more basic and more general one, a criticism resting upon a principle which is fundamental to Islam and which is at the heart of Ghazali’s theology: the principle that God cannot share his nature with any other thing or person. This is what His utter uniqueness means. Therefore, God’s utter uniqueness makes it logically impossible to say that He is *literally one* with or even *like* any thing or person. This, Ghazali believes, cuts the ground not only from under the Christian notion of Incarnation (when literally interpreted), but also from under those mystics or

<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.*, Arabic text, p. 29.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

writers on mysticism who take certain mystic utterances for claims of literal identification with God.<sup>1</sup>

In our search to explain what "mystical union" means we have so far come to a negative conclusion. Whether the union is to be regarded as a union of any two identities, or as a union of two specific identities, the divine and the human, one of which is utterly unique, if the word "union" is taken literally then the relation is logically impossible. God as unique, by definition cannot share His nature with any other thing or person.

There is the possibility that the word "union" be taken metaphorically, and this is in fact what Ghazali claims it to be. Now, in order to understand what the metaphor union means we ought to be clear about what the word is intended to refer to. We shall have to examine briefly what for Ghazali the *mystical goal* is, since "mystical union" and "mystical goal" while differing in designation have the same denotation in Ghazali's thought.<sup>2</sup> "Mystical union" does not refer to anything other than the mystical goal although it says something specific about it.

<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the most famous of these utterances is that of the Tenth Century (A. D.) Sufi (or Islamic mystic) al-Ḥallāj who declared: "*ana l-Ḥaqq*," (I am the Real). This statement is said to have cost him his life because it was interpreted literally. (See Ghazali, *Ib.* I, 1, *bāb* 3, 2nd *bayān*, p. 32; also Nicholson, *Studies in Islamic Mysticism*, p. 80). Ghazali believes that al-Ḥallāj must have been so completely absorbed in the contemplation of God that there was no chance for attention to anything else (union as subjective *tawḥīd*; see our discussion of this pp. 30 ff.). Ghazali says "...and when one thing is taken up and absorbed in an other, then it may be said that one is the other." (*Maq.* p. 61). Ghazali explains another utterance, this one by the Ninth Century (A. D.) Sufi al-Bisṭāmī who is said to have exclaimed "Glory be to Me! How great is My Glory", also, "Within this robe (his own) is nought but Allah". (In *Rad.* p. 38, Ghazali attributes this to al-Ḥallāj which he does not do elsewhere). Ghazali believes that Bisṭāmī is repeating on behalf of God what God would have said of Himself. (*Ib.* I, 1, *bāb* 3, 2nd *bayān*, p. 32; see also *Maq.* p. 75 on same). For other utterances and their interpretation by Ghazali see *Maq.*, p. 61 and *Mish.*, p. 61; *Maq.*, p. 75; *Mish.*, p. 60.

<sup>2</sup> It is the failure to see this that led Wensinck to treat the two as mutually exclusive. He equates the mystical goal with what he calls gnosis: "Il est donc bien claire que la mystique de Ghazzali consiste tout d'abord en cette connaissance supérieure qui tient également la place de ce qu'est l'illumination et l'union chez d'autres mystiques..." (*La Pensée de Ghazzālī*, Adrien—Maisonneuve p. 147; my italics). There is no doubt of the importance of mystical knowledge as an element of the mystical goal. Our discussion of Ghazali's mystical goal will show what other elements go to constitute it. At any rate, "mystical union", as will be seen, is a way of talking about the mystical goal. It does not name a substitute.

### C. THE MYSTICAL GOAL

The goal of man, according to Ghazali, is the fulfilment of whatever distinguishes him as human.<sup>1</sup> Although man's body is his link with all that is material he yet partakes of the spiritual world by virtue of his soul. This is man's link with what is above and beyond him in the scheme of things, and it is the peculiarity that distinguishes him from what is beneath him. Man's goal is determined, positively, in terms of his link with the spiritual world, his real home, and negatively in relation to his body and its needs. Whatever the specific goal of man is it must be one in which his soul attains its highest fulfilment, free as much as possible from the sway of bodily needs and desires.

We shall distinguish three aspects of the mystical goal, man's final goal. These are *qurb* (likeness), subjective *tawḥīd* (subjective unification), and objective *tawḥīd* (objective unification). They may be spoken of roughly as the moral, the psychological-devotional, and the metaphysical aspects respectively.<sup>2</sup>

#### *Qurb*

Man was created in the image of his Creator<sup>3</sup> and his goal in this life must be to live up to this likeness and seek to enrich his character by becoming like God in every possible way. There are what may be called points of existing similarity between man (any man qua man) and God. There are also points of similarity to be acquired by any seeker after the ultimate goal of man. An example of the former: man's soul is the initiator and coordinator of many of the movements of the body. Similarly, God is the (remote)<sup>4</sup> efficient cause of the

<sup>1</sup> This is the Greek notion of excellence. I have become more fully aware of the importance of the general relationship in Ghazali between man's nature and man's goal after reading Obermann's *Der Philosophische und Religiöse Subjectivismus Ghazzālīs*.

<sup>2</sup> As far as I know no writer on Ghazali has yet clearly distinguished and related these three aspects of the complex goal, the mystical goal. As a matter of fact they do not appear in Ghazali's own writings as distinct or related as they might be. The subject deserves fuller and independent treatment, but in this essay only a brief discussion is possible.

<sup>3</sup> How this is to be reconciled with God's uniqueness will be discussed later, Chapter IV, p. 52 f.

<sup>4</sup> *Rad.*, p. 59. Ghazali makes the distinction between the remote and the proximate cause. This does not prevent him (in *Ib.* IV, 5, *shaṭr* 1, 2nd *bayān*, p. 213) from saying: "He (God) is the *only* cause... Other things are under necessity (except man's will) and are not independent in initiating motion of the least atom



events in the universe. Except for the act of Creation and the extent—both degree and extensiveness—of control, the soul in its small universe, the body, is like God in His Universe.<sup>1</sup> The similarity to be acquired refers to the attributes of God that would in some sense<sup>2</sup> become the character of the mystic. This would be in accordance with the saying of the Prophet: “Acquire ye the character (*akblāq*) of God”. Since the mystical goal is a state that has yet to be attained it is this to-be-acquired similarity rather than an existing similarity that lies ahead for the mystic. Existing similarity serves to establish man’s affiliation and therefore to help give direction to the mystical goal. One could say that it gives both a motivational and an obligational impetus to the acquisition of similarity in every other respect possible.

This aspect of the mystical goal is called by Ghazali *qurb* (nearness) which is a metaphor that borrows spatial proximity to express a likeness in qualities.<sup>3</sup> Thus the goal of man is the attainment of *qurb* or likeness to God.<sup>4</sup> One may call this aspect of the Goal spiritual-moral attunement which could include the idea that the will of the servant has become ‘one’ with that of His Lord.

#### *Subjective Tawhīd*

Man, having this link with the Beyond, this divine affiliation, fulfills his peculiar excellence if he turns away from all that is not divine and godly, not only as far as the qualities that make up his character, but also in what he loves, worships, and what occupies his thoughts. Man by virtue of such affiliation not only yearns to

in the kingdoms of Heaven and Earth.” (My italics). But when Ghazali speaks of God as the *only* cause just as when he speaks of Him as the *only* existent he usually means the only “real” cause (i.e. ultimate necessary cause) and the only “real” existent (i.e. the independent or necessary existent) while other causes are ordinary (*Rad.*, p. 59) or contingent causes. On the relation between God as necessary existent and God as ultimate cause see note 1, p. 19.

<sup>1</sup> *Mad.*, p. 6.

<sup>2</sup> See first part of note 2, p. 35; also Chapter Four, p. 53.

<sup>3</sup> Ghazali also uses the word “*qurb*” in other ways. Among them, as a metaphor for affective closeness and intimacy, also as a metaphor for the proximity resulting from knowledge and the lifting of the veil. Such usages refer to what we are considering the second aspect of the mystical goal. The use of “*qurb*” to refer to what we are calling the first aspect is both distinct and predominant.

<sup>4</sup> “And I mean by *taṣawwuf* that for which man was created: seeking the path of *qurb* to God.” *Miz.* p. 140.

“And he who would be dear to God must, as far as possible, be like Him and such as He is.” Plato, *Laws* IV, 716 C; Jowett. “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.” St. Mathew, 5:48).

become like God but also to shut off his concern, his love, his attention from all else but God, to worship and contemplate none other than Him. And when man knows the majesty and perfection that is God’s he finds none other worthy of his complete absorption. We shall cover all these affective-contemplative-adorational attitudes in their negative expression—i.e. the shutting off, the turning away—by Ghazali’s term *fanā* (or passing away<sup>1</sup>), and the other side of the same coin, their positive expression—the exclusive concern, love, contemplation, worship—by the metaphor *istighbrāq* (immersion or absorption). Then we have called this second aspect of the mystical goal in both its negative and positive expressions *subjective tawhīd* or Subjective Unification.<sup>2</sup>

#### *Objective Tawhīd*

There remains one final aspect to Ghazali’s Mystical Goal, one which he usually calls the highest attainment. We have already noted that God is a necessary existent and all else has derivative or contingent existence. Thus it may be said that there is only God and what depends on Him, God and the God-derivative or God-Aspect.<sup>3</sup> Tables, water-ways, pins, dogs, even the mystic’s soul—in short the heavens and the earth—have no reality in any ultimate sense. This is not to say that they do not *exist* in the ordinary sense of the word. It just

<sup>1</sup> Translating after Nicholson in *J. R. A. S.*, 1913, “The Goal of Muhammadan Mysticism.” Part of the meaning of the word “*fanā*” in Sufi literature is the same as *qurb*. The mystic who has attained likeness (*qurb*) may also be said to have died to (*faniya ‘an*) his old self and become morally and spiritually transformed (Nicholson, *Op. Cit.*, p. 61). However, in the works of Ghazali, *fanā* and *qurb* generally have the distinct meaning that we are presenting here.

<sup>2</sup> Both *fanā* and *istighbrāq* are subjective states in which the mystic’s attention, love, devotion is turned away from all else but God. In other words, *there is none and nothing but God* (hence the word “*tawhīd*”) in the mystic’s consciousness (hence my choice of the word “subjective”). On this subjective use of “*tawhīd*” see *Iḥ*, I, 10, *bāb* 1, 3rd *bayān*, p. 318, *Arb.*, p. 240. On the subjective interpretation of *fanā* and *istighbrāq* see *Arb.*, p. 240, but especially *Iḥ*. IV, 1, *rukn* 2, 2nd *bayān*, p. 28, where he compares this state to the lover completely absorbed in his beloved with no chance to notice himself or any other person or thing.

The subjective nature of this aspect of the mystical goal does not imply that the *reality-status* of God is subjective. To make this apparent we may clarify an ambiguity in the following statement: ‘God is exclusively in the mystic’s attention’. Talking about the reality-status of God one may mean that the word “God” merely names the content of some mystic’s consciousness. This is not Ghazali’s meaning. On the other hand, one may simply mean that the mystic is now contemplating or loves only God. This is Ghazali’s meaning.

<sup>3</sup> *Mish.*, p. 59.

means that in themselves they are not ultimately real, they do not have the principle of their existence within them, but depend on Him. He depends on no other. In view of this, and in this sense, it may be said that only God really exists, that there is no he but He.<sup>1</sup> This theocentric perspective may be called the Kingdom of the One-and-Onliness.<sup>2</sup>

Now if man naturally desires to know things as they really are, and he does, then he is ever failing until he ascends to the Kingdom of the One-and-Onliness; until he sees things, himself included, from the theocentric perspective. From this perspective the mystic sees only God<sup>3</sup> (as ultimately real). This aspect of the Mystical Goal I am calling *objective*<sup>4</sup> *tawhīd* or Objective Unification.

### The Metaphor Union

Having briefly noted the various aspects of the mystical goal we are now in a position to understand the metaphor union.

Ghazali's Mystical Goal may be characterized in two ways. One, in terms of various meanings of the statement "Nothing remaineth any more save the One, the Real; and the import of His word, 'All perisheth save His countenance'<sup>5</sup> becomes the experience of the soul"<sup>6</sup>; the other in terms of the metaphor *union*. Both essentially express the same thing.

In terms of the notion of "only God remains" the three aspects of the Mystical Goal may be given these formulations: The first: nothing remains in the character of the mystic which is not God-like,

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 64.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60. This appears in the *Ihyā'* as the fourth level of *tawhīd*. *Ih.*, IV, 5 *shātr* 1, 2nd *bayān*, p. 212.

<sup>4</sup> Although this perspective is realized by the mystic in intuition (*Ih.*, IV, 5 *shātr* 1, 2nd *bayān* p. 212; also see Ch. III., p. 43 ff. on intuition) and as an intuition is subjective in that it is a state of the mystic's consciousness, yet the intuition has an *objective* metaphysical reference. It is an insight into the way things are, and things are all one in a sense (see in this Chapter pp. 30-32). *Subjective tawhīd*, on the other hand, is the exclusion in the mystic's consciousness of all things other than God. The difference may be noted thus (a) In the mystic's consciousness there is only one content, God (subjective *tawhīd*). (b) The mystic sees that all things are in a sense one (objective *tawhīd*). While the two aspects are thus distinguished they are not separate in occurrence at the highest level of attainment. For, then, the unity of all things or the reality of God in relation to things, is the exclusive content of the mystic's consciousness.

<sup>5</sup> *Qur'ān*, S. xxviii, 88.

<sup>6</sup> *Mishb.*, p. 97.

and it is as if *only God* (or God's character) *is within him*. The second: the mystic dies to all else until *only God remains as the content of his consciousness*, and *the object of his love, contemplation, and adoration*.<sup>1</sup> The third: the mystic attains an intuitive perspective from which he sees that there is *nought in existence except Allah*, that all existence is His Aspect.

In terms of the metaphor *union*, the notion of *qurb* may be characterized as the state in which the mystic has become so like God in character, his will so attuned to His Will that it may be said that man and God are one, not in the sense of being one and the same but in the sense of being very much *alike*<sup>2</sup> and *in harmony*. Man's heart is so pure that it reflects only God. It is the unity of a clean mirror with an image in it.<sup>3</sup>

In terms of the aspect of *subjective tawhīd* the metaphor *union* would be used to connote the affective-contemplative-adorational absorption in, and feeling of intimacy with God who is the sole 'content' of the mystic's consciousness. Man's heart has become of such transparency, like clear glass, that it seems to be like one with the wine (God) within it.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, in terms of the aspect of *objective tawhīd*, man perceives himself along with other things one with God, not in the pantheistic sense that God and the Universe share one essence—for Ghazali is no pantheist—but in the sense in which God and Universe form the unit of necessary existent-dependent existent. It is the complementary unity of a Creator-Sustainer and His satellites. Or to put it differently, if we look at things from the point of view of God's Agency then *ultimately* and metaphysically *it* is all that counts. The manifold of existence is made one by the 'skewer' of God's Agency which pervades all.

Thus it is clear that the connotation of the metaphor union varies

<sup>1</sup> "And it is as if there is no existence except for that which is present (in consciousness)", *Ih.* II, 8, *bāb* 2, *maqām* 1, p. 257.

<sup>2</sup> See note 2, p. 35.

<sup>3</sup> *Maq.*, p. 74.

<sup>4</sup> *Maq.*, p. 75, also *Mishb.*, p. 61:

"The glass is thin, the wine is clear!  
The twain are alike, the matter is perplexed;  
For 'tis as though there were wine and no wineglass there  
Or as though there were wine-glass and nought of wine!"

Ghazali comments:

"Here there is a difference between saying: 'The wine is the wine-glass', and saying, 'tis as though it were the wine-glass'." (*Ibidem.*)

with the aspect of the mystical goal to which it applies. As used of the first aspect, *qurb*, it connotes *likeness to* and *attunement with* God. In applying to the second aspect, subjective *tawhīd*, union connotes *exclusive absorption in* and the *feeling of intimacy* with God. As for the third aspect, the word "union" there is strictly speaking not a metaphor. As a matter of fact it is more correct to use the word "unification", the equivalent of "*tawhīd*", which is Ghazali's choice. The word "*jam*" (lit., bringing together) is also used sometimes.<sup>1</sup> These words refer to the unity (metaphysical not metaphorical) that characterizes reality from the perspective of God's pervading Agency (the Kingdom of the One-and-Onliness). Ghazali calls the mystic's absorption in the attainment of that perspective *al-istighbrāq fi t-tawhīd* (the immersion in unification); also *al-fanā' fi l-wāhīd il-ḥaqq* (the passing away in the One, the Real).

#### D. THE QUESTION REFORMULATED

We may now turn to the question that is the title of this chapter. Let us first summarize briefly the ground we have thus far covered.

##### *Brief Summary*

We have seen that the question of this chapter is about the possibility of the mystical relation itself not about the possibility of desire for that relation (or any other) with an utterly unique and unknowable God. We have noted further that it is logical possibility that should concern us primarily. We then had to examine the concept of mystical union in order to be clear about what is or is not logically

<sup>1</sup> *Ib.* IV, 5, *shatr* 1, 2nd *bayān*, p. 213. In *Arb.*, p. 59 "*jam*" and "*tawhīd*" are used interchangeably. Other words used by Ghazali that have close connotation are the following: "*wiṣāl*" (used by lovers to refer to sexual union, *Ib.* II, 8 *bāb* 1, 2nd *bayān*, pp. 246, 248); "*wuṣūl*" which may mean either of two things: (a) arrival, attainment or (b) connection, contact. In *Maq.*, p. 76 he uses the word *wuṣūl* approvingly, but in *Munq.*, p. 50 he mentions it among words that should not be used about the mystical relation. It is not unlikely that this inconsistency can be resolved by noting the ambiguity of the word. He would accept the mystical goal as a state of attainment, but would reject it as a state of connection or contact which the crude mind imagines to take place between man and God. Some other words that have close connotation to the ones already mentioned are rejected by Ghazali because they suggest that God shares His Essence, e.g. "*ḥulūl*" (incarnation) and "*ittiḥād*" (identification).

An additional note on "*wiṣāl*" is that the word is used interchangeably with "*qurb*" and "*fanā*" in *Ib.* IV, 9, 2nd *bayān*, p. 367, interchangeably with "*tawhīd*" in *Arb.*, p. 56. This interchangeability is one of the clues on the relatedness of the distinct aspects of the mystical goal.

impossible if the word "union" is taken literally. Taken metaphorically—as Ghazali wished it to be—the word denotes the mystical goal, and its connotation varies with each of three aspects (and there are three) of the mystical goal.

##### *The Question Reformulated*

It follows, therefore, that the problem of this chapter would have to be reformulated in terms of the possible logical incompatibility between the notion of God as utterly unique and unknowable and each of the three aspects of the mystical goal. What is the incompatibility between *qurb*, subjective *tawhīd*, and objective *tawhīd*, on the one hand, and an utterly unique unknowable God, on the other?

In answer it must be said that the incompatibility is not directly between the aspects of the mystical goal and the notion of God as unique and unknowable. For it is of utmost importance to note that the mystical goal is not a relation between the mystic and God *as unique and unknowable*, but rather a knowable God who may have a likeness.<sup>1</sup> The incompatibility is thus between what the mystical goal *implies about God*, on the one hand, and the view of the nature of God discussed in the first chapter, on the other. The incompatibility is between two views of the divine nature. In other words, how can it be said that God is utterly unique, yet man was created in His image and is asked to become like Him in every possible way? How can God be utterly unlike anything yet like something? <sup>2</sup> Furthermore, how can it be said that God is utterly unknowable yet propose a mystical goal which either implies that He is knowable, or is in one of its elements a cognitive relation with God? How can God be utterly unknowable yet knowable? <sup>3</sup>

Briefly, this is how each aspect of the mystical goal would seem to conflict with the notion of God as utterly unique and unknowable.

<sup>1</sup> The mystical relation is further analyzed in the section on mystical knowledge in Chapter Four.

<sup>2</sup> That man becomes like God, is of course never meant literally. Man at best acquires human characteristics the names for which are used of God also, but never in the same sense. This is sufficient to resolve the seeming contradiction, but more will have to be said later (Ch. VII, pp. 103 ff.; also see Ch. IV, pp. 52 f.) on the nature and ground of divine attribution that will shed further light on the so-called similarity between man and God, and will show more clearly why there is no real inconsistency in Ghazali's view.

<sup>3</sup> "On the agnosticism is reared an unintelligible gnosticism." W. H. T. Gairdner in *Der Islam*, Vol. V, 1914, "Al-Ghazali's *Mishkāt al-Anwār* and the Ghazali Problem," p. 133.

First, *qurb*, becoming like God, implies that God can have a likeness, and this is incompatible with His utter uniqueness. It also implies that the mystic knows God, for he must know what he is to become like, and this is incompatible with God's unknowability. Second, in subjective *tawhid* the mystic is confronted with the knowable aspect of God whether he exclusively contemplates the revealed attributes of God or loves and worships Him in all His perfections and for all His blessings to man. Finally, the insight of objective *tawhid* reveals the essential nature of God as the necessary existent on whose creative agency all that is depends for being, for being what they are, and for doing what they do. This insight seems to reveal something about God in His relation with all things, and to this extent seems incompatible with the view that God is utterly unknowable.

It is clear, therefore, that the prior problem—a double pronged one—for our consideration is whether God can be (a) both like and unlike, (b) knowable and unknowable. The problem of the possibility of mystical union reduces itself to the double pronged one just mentioned. We shall discuss the question of how God can be both knowable and unknowable first and deal with the like-unlike question in the course of that discussion. We shall also discuss what special role, if any, mystics (and prophets) have in knowing God. This was one of the points raised at the close of our first chapter.

In dealing with the knowable-unknowable problem in the next two chapters we shall be taking it up in the way Ghazali raises the problem, and the way he explicitly attempts to solve it. Later in this essay we shall resume the problem as we think it should be asked, and then seek to solve it in terms of principles to be found in Ghazali's thought. Although he did not use these principles for such a solution, they are nonetheless appropriately usable for that purpose.

## CHAPTER THREE THE UNKNOWABLE ASPECT

### A. PRELIMINARY

We have thus far made explicit some seeming contradictions which are implicit in Ghazali's thought. The same contradictions can also be seen in sets of explicit assertions scattered throughout his writings. On the one hand one finds something like the following:

"(God is) ... an Existent who transcends all that is comprehensible by human sight or human insight..."<sup>1</sup>

Also,

"The end result of the knowledge of the '*arifin*'<sup>2</sup> is their inability to know Him, and their knowledge is, in truth, that they do not know Him and that it is absolutely impossible for them to know Him."<sup>3</sup>

Finally,

"It is impossible for anyone to really know Allah except Allah (Himself)."<sup>4</sup>

On the other hand one finds the following:

"The ultimate goal (for man) is to know God."<sup>5</sup>

And,

"I know none (or nothing) except God."<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Mish.*, p. 96, Royal Asiatic Society. I have made three minor changes in Gairdner's text. The word "all" appears as "ALL" in Gairdner. Also "sight" and "insight" appear with capital "S" and "I", respectively. There is no justification for all this capital lettering.

<sup>2</sup> Literally the word, used here in the accusative form, means knowers. Since the 'knowers' in this context fail to know, the word cannot have the achievement connotation that it otherwise has. Therefore, it must be understood to apply to those who seek to know God in a dedicated sort of way.

<sup>3</sup> *Maq.*, p. 22.

<sup>4</sup> *Maq.*, p. 21.

<sup>5</sup> *Miz.*, p. 42.

<sup>6</sup> *Maq.*, p. 19. The quotation is put in the mouth of "some sayers", any man.

If we take the first of the latter two statements we will observe that it need not contradict any of the statements in the former group. The prescribed goal may be to know God and yet the actual terminus of man's search may well be a frustration, i.e. the goal may be unattainable. To say, "You ought to dedicate your life to know God, but you will find you can never know Him" is not to utter a self-contradiction. At worst, it is a sadistic recommendation; while the statement, "The ultimate goal (for man) is to know God" at best implies the hope that God is in some sense knowable.

It is the other assertion, 'I know none (or nothing) except God' which is logically incompatible with the first group of assertions. For it implies, in addition to the statement 'Whatever I know is God' which will be clarified below,<sup>1</sup> it implies the statement 'I know God'. If God is unknowable to any man it is logically impossible for Him to be known by any man. In other words, the assertions: 'God is unknowable to man' and 'I (a human) know God', are logically incompatible. At least they seem incompatible in the absence of any analysis to show the contrary.

Ghazali is quite aware of the seeming incompatibility, and this is how he presents the matter.

"If someone were to say 'I know none (or nothing) except God' he is right, and if he were to say 'I do not know God' he is (also) right. Now it is known that denial and affirmation (of the same proposition) cannot both be true, but rather share truth and falsity. If the denial is true the affirmation is false and vice versa."<sup>2</sup>

How, then, can affirmation ('I know God', hence 'God is knowable') and denial ('I do not, rather, cannot, know God', hence 'God is unknowable') of the same proposition both be true?

### *The Three Assumptions*

For this question to express a real problem at least three assumptions must be made.

*The First Assumption.* What is affirmed and denied must be the same proposition. For example, it would be self-contradictory to assert 'The grass is green all over and the grass is not green all over'. But it is not self-contradictory to say 'The grass blades are green and the grass roots are not green'.

<sup>1</sup> pp. 50 ff.

<sup>2</sup> *Maq.*, p. 19.

*The Second Assumption.* Both the affirmation and the denial must be taken as true statements. Thus it is self-contradictory to say: 'The grass blades are green (true) and the grass blades are not green (also true)'. But it is not self-contradictory if either the affirmation or the denial is false while the other is true.

*The Third Assumption.* The affirmation and the denial must be of the same linguistic type, otherwise one cannot significantly contradict the other. For example, a busy but rude housewife's remark to an unwelcome early morning visitor: "My day is gone!" is not contradicted by the retort, "But it is only nine a.m.". The housewife's complaint—it may at the same time be a prediction—which is aimed at driving the visitor away is not the kind of statement that can significantly be contradicted by that retort because it is a different type of statement. This will be discussed more fully in due course.

In the rest of this essay we shall show that according to Ghazali's own explicit and implicit principles the assumptions are false and therefore the contradiction unreal.

In this and the next chapter we shall discuss the knowable and unknowable aspects of God and conclude with Ghazali's explicit rejection of the first assumption. In his rejection he follows the principle that

"...if there is a difference in the aspects of the discourse then it is possible that the two parts (forming the apparent contradiction) are true."<sup>1</sup>

The two parts, the denial ('God is unknowable') and the affirmation ('God is knowable') are reconciled by distinguishing between two aspects of God: His Essence, on the one hand, and His Attributes and Acts, on the other. Let us call the former the unknowable aspect and the latter the knowable aspect. By means of this distinction Ghazali challenges the first assumption and shows that it is not the same proposition which is being asserted or denied. 'God's Essence is unknowable', 'God's Attributes and Acts are knowable'<sup>2</sup>—these are two logically compatible statements like the pair already mentioned: 'The grass blades are green' and 'The grass roots are not green'.

<sup>1</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>2</sup> We shall see that in the last analysis Ghazali considers this statement to be false. His agnosticism is not compromised. The problem then becomes why and on what ground are the statements made about God ('God is powerful', 'God is kind' etc.) which imply that He is knowable. This will be dealt with in Chapter Seven.

## B. GOD'S ESSENCE IS UNKNOWNABLE

God's Essence, what He is in Himself, this is unknowable to man. Although according to Ghazali, God is knowable and known to Himself. Of course, it is unknowability to man that concerns us in this essay.

We shall now inquire into what it means to say that God's Essence is unknowable and into the reasons that justify it.

*God Is Indefinable*

In one sense, God is unknowable in that He is indefinable. We can have no adequate answer to the question "What is God?". If in this question a genus and differentia (this sense of a definition) is requested, then no such definition can be given. For this would imply that God is one of a kind, but Ghazali would not compromise God's uniqueness.

Now, it is possible to give a definition, overlooking the distinction between genus and differentia, and simply listing the characteristics without which a naming label cannot apply to a thing. This sort of definition can be compatible with the uniqueness of a definiendum, for the stated qualities can mark it off as the only one of its kind without making it one of a kind. But what qualities could these be? They cannot be something like justice, mercy, knowledge, etc., for if these have the same meaning they do at the human level then God is not unique. And if these are said to apply to God in a sense we cannot understand, then as far as human understanding is concerned we have not stated what God is, and therefore He is in this sense unknowable.

We must conclude that neither sort of definition can yield a formula that tells us what God's nature is.

It may be suggested that necessary existence, that distinctive metaphysical trait, and its correlate, God's all pervading Agency or Will, might be sufficient to reveal the nature of God. But important as these may seem, Ghazali rejects their use for such a purpose.

The word "will", to begin with, is borrowed from the human context and its fate is like that of the other attribute-words, "justice", "knowledge", "kindness", etc. Either the word retains its human-context meaning and God is not unique (totally unacceptable), or it has a different meaning, but then it does not help us to know God.

Furthermore, even if one were to hold that the word helps to

indicate that God somehow is responsible for the existence and occurrence of all things, Ghazali would maintain that it does not reveal God's Essence. To say that someone, God, is an agent (*fā'il*, literally, a do-er) is not to give an essential characteristic of God as God. This would be like trying to define water as a cool liquid.<sup>1</sup> Neither Will nor Agent are attributes of essence.

Ghazali uses similar reasoning in the case of necessary existence.<sup>2</sup> This needs fuller discussion.

*Necessary Existence*

According to Ghazali the statement 'God is a necessary existent' is merely a negation of what in any case is an accidental characteristic. Here is his analysis.

Despite the affirmative form, the statement is in reality a denial. It denies that God has or needs a cause. Now if one asks "What is X?", it would be improper to answer (in the affirmative), "X has or needs a cause", for this merely gives an accidental characteristic. It would be like that answer, "He is The Agent". So to answer (in the negative), "X has or needs *no* cause", is even more improper.<sup>3</sup>

The tactics of Ghazali here, obviously, are to reduce necessary existence to a negative connotation, so that in effect he can say this only tells us what God is not and not what He is. Furthermore, although it gives the impression of being about God's Essence, in fact it merely tells us that God does not have or need what would anyway be an accidental, not an essential characteristic, that of being caused. And since "knowing a thing is knowing what it really is, its essence"<sup>4</sup> then how can denying an accidental attribute be considered knowledge in this sense?

*Criticism*

We need to decide two things. First, whether this denial of a cause is about God's essential nature or about accidental features. Second, whether as a negation it implies anything positive about God.

The decision on the first matter depends on the interpretation of the denial. What has been said by the statement 'God has or needs no cause'? It could be offered in the manner of a theological 'report',

<sup>1</sup> *Maq.*, p. 19.

<sup>2</sup> "*al-khāṣṣiyyah l-ilāhiyyah*" ("the distinctive divine characteristic"), *Maq.*, p. 18.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>4</sup> *Maq.*, pp. 19-20.

as a result of a negative 'discovery'. We 'found out' that God neither has nor needs a cause. If so, to be or not to be caused is not necessarily a question of essential nature. 'God is caused' or 'God is not caused' may well be of equal impropriety as answers to the question 'What is God?' as 'Water is cool' and 'Man is tall' are to the respective questions 'What is Water?' and 'What is man?'. But this is not the correct interpretation of the denial nor is it consistent with the theology of Ghazali. By adopting, by implication, the above interpretation of the denial he has betrayed his own principles.

The other interpretation of the statement 'God has or needs no cause', the one we would advance as both more adequate and more consonant with Ghazali's principles, is that God *is not the kind of being* whose existence can be accounted for in terms of the notion of causality. It is not the 'report' that God *does not* suffer causality or *never did*, but that He is not the sort of thing to suffer or not to suffer causality, for the application of causality logically conflicts with other statements we make about God. So when Ghazali says "God needs no <sup>1</sup> cause" he should not mean that God can bring Himself into being without, so to speak, 'having to use a cause'. The notions of coming into being and causality are inapplicable to God. This must be Ghazali's position if he means anything at all by God's eternity. But clearly this kind of talk that marks the line dividing God as a unique category of being from all other things does concern the essential nature of God (regardless, for the moment, of what it says) in spite of the fact that the formula is in the negative and may not be a full enough answer to the question "What is God?". It may be concluded, then, that the statement 'God has or needs no cause' as we interpreted it, is about the essential nature of God, the sort of being He is. <sup>2</sup>

Now, what does it say about God? What does it reveal of God's Essence? Ghazali's contention is that since it only says what God is not it does not say what He is, and therefore we learn nothing about God except that He is not caused—more precisely that He is not the sort of thing that can be caused—while all other things are caused. But, in saying this, it may be asked, do we not imply some

<sup>1</sup> "yastaghni"; literally, "can do without (something)".

<sup>2</sup> It cannot be said though, strictly speaking, that this gives God a genus, being, and a differentia, necessary existence. For, according to Ghazali God does not share existence or being with anyone or any thing, thus being is not a genus. "Even the term 'existence' which has the widest application does not apply to God and other than God in the same way." *Ib.* IV, 6, 10th *bayān*, p. 281. Also, "'Existence' is shared homonymously with no similarity". *Ma.*, p. 193.

knowledge of what God essentially is, some positive knowledge? How can we say that God *is not* the sort of being whose existence can be accounted for in such and such terms without knowing something positive about the sort of being God is?

Ghazali does not ask this question. We are asking it. It is a familiar one and usually appears in more general terms. To draw the line of agnosis, it is asked (or stated, if the matter is taken as settled) must not one know beyond the line? Or in the words of Wittgenstein:

"...in order to draw a limit to thinking, we should have to be able to think both sides of this limit."<sup>1</sup>

Now we are raising the question in its specific form—namely, whether denying causality of God implies anything positive about Him. We shall in Chapter Five discuss the more general question.

What do we imply about God in rejecting the applicability of the concept of cause? To be caused means to come to be at a certain point in time before which that thing was not. Asserting the applicability of causality implies that what is causable is in time and therefore changes. It also implies a dependence on an other which has precedence over it both in time and in metaphysical role. Now when we say that God cannot suffer causality we are implying that He cannot suffer all that goes with being causable. God is above time, change, and dependence on an other. Is this then what we know about God by denying His being causable? But this knowledge is only more negatives, more cases in which we deny God some attribute which we know to be applicable in the world of human experience. How can this give us positive knowledge about the sort of thing God is? Thus while we disagree with Ghazali as to whether necessary existence refers to the essential nature of God, we agree with him that it denies that certain characteristics are applicable to God without revealing anything positive about His nature.

We have found thus far that no positive *definition* can be given of God, no formula that reveals in any positive way His nature. God is, therefore, unknowable in this first sense. Is God knowable in any other way?

#### *God and Immediate Experience*

Could it be that while God's essential nature cannot be defined it can nonetheless be known by immediate experience or *dhawq*?<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus.*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, Preface, p. 27.

<sup>2</sup> Literally means tasting. The word is rendered as "immediate experience"

This word as used by Ghazali has an ambiguous reference, and the ambiguity has escaped his translators and commentators.

There seem to be two ways in which an experience can be immediate and cognitive. One is intuition or intuitive apprehension, the other may be called personally becoming or going through. The two may be differentiated in terms of the object of knowledge.

Suppose the object is a feeling like pain. The immediate experience of pain—as distinguished from hearing or talking about it—cannot properly be characterized as an intuitive apprehension. It is, rather, suffering, going through pain or becoming pained. And an immediate experience of pain is a better way of knowing what pain is than simply hearing a description or a definition of pain. This sense of immediate experience as going through or personally becoming takes advantage of the tactile connotation of the literal meaning of “*dhawq*” (or tasting).

Parenthetically, two questions come to mind in connection with Ghazali’s point here. First, in what sense is *going through* pain or sickness *knowing* what pain and sickness are? Second, why is going through called a *better* way of knowing than description? In answer to the first question one might suggest that the verb “to know” is often used in the sense in which Ghazali consciously uses it (and this applies to the Arabic). For example, ‘I know what pain is’ may mean ‘I can tell you what pain is’, but it also means ‘I have felt pain myself’ or ‘I know what it is like to be in pain’.

As to the second question, ‘Why is going through a better way of knowing?’, one would beg the issue if one were to answer “because one has *really suffered pain*”. Or, if one were to say “because he who suffers pain is better able to describe it”, then this would make ability to describe the test of “true knowledge” which is contrary to the intention.

There are perhaps two reasons for the priority of going through. First, the actual feeling of pain has so many *unique subtle shades* for which there are no words. This may be called epistemic priority. Description here fails. Only actual experience can give one ‘the feel’.

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by W.M. Watt in his translation of the *Munqidh (The Faith and Practice of Ghazali)*, pp. 55, 62); “*expérience personnelle*” by Wensinck in *La Pensée de Ghazālī*, p. 109, also “*goût*”, pp. 112, 119, which is the literal meaning. Gairdner in his translation of the *Mishkāt* renders “*dhawq*” as “intuition”, also “mystic experience”. In our usage here “immediate experience” is the equivalent of “*dhawq*”. It covers both senses of the ambiguous reference of “*dhawq*”: personal experience or going through, and intuition.

Second, there is a valuational priority. This arises in the context of moral and religious concern where one talks about those who can define virtue but live a life of sin, who can prove the existence of God but lack faith, etc. Thus whoever has lived through what he talks about or preaches is somehow in a better more sincere position than the mere moral and intellectual pedant. It is the first reason, however, that gives cognitive priority.

To return to the objects of going through.

Suppose the object of knowledge is a physical or mental state (*hāl*) such as sickness, drunkenness or asceticism. Or again, if the object of immediate experience is a function or profession, especially esoteric ones like magic, then one *goes through* these rather than intuiting them. And only one who has gone through them truly knows what they are.<sup>1</sup>

One other kind of example that Ghazali mentions: taking the hierarchy in the scheme of things (dead matter, plants, animals, humans, heightened humanity or prophecy, angels, God) then one can only know a particular level by belonging to that level, or going through it.<sup>2</sup>

Such is the way one can distinguish immediate experience or *dhawq* as going through.

In contrast with this usage, immediate experience as intuitive apprehension avoids the tactile connotation of ‘tasting’ and borrows its connotation from the field of vision.<sup>3</sup> Thus

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<sup>1</sup> *Maq.*, p. 24.

<sup>2</sup> Implied in *Ibid.*, pp. 19-21. Strictly speaking only conscious beings (man and above) are aware of what they go through and can be said to know. Ghazali also implies that the higher may know the lower, presumably because in this Aristotelian type classification a being at each level *has* all the *basic* characteristics of the lower levels in addition to its own. But this is rather peculiar since man cannot be said to know what it is to be a plant just because he, too, digests food, reproduces, etc. Furthermore, such a view cannot apply to God since He cannot be said to possess the characteristics of being below Him. Perhaps in the case of God, His knowledge of things—to the extent that one can speak of such knowledge—is not restricted by having to go through and is nonetheless a perfect knowledge.

<sup>3</sup> M. A. Ewer in her *A Survey of Mystical Symbolism* considers sight an intellectual sense used by mystics symbolically when they want to convey the notion of comprehension (pp. 39 ff.); touch is an emotional sense used by mystics symbolically for the feeling of presence (pp. 53 ff.); hearing is ethical (the Voice of God) and is used for adjustment and harmony (pp. 45 ff.); taste and smell, the chemical senses, are drawn upon to indicate joy (pp. 50 ff.).



“*dhawq* is seeing (or witnessing, *mushābadah*).”<sup>1</sup>

In the *Mishkāt* Ghazali compares this religious intuition to that of the poet which he also calls *dhawq* and which he describes as “a sort of perceptive faculty”.<sup>2</sup>

From Ghazali’s use of “*dhawq*” as intuition and from the use of the equivalent terms “*kasbf*” or “*mukāshafab*”<sup>3</sup> one finds that the proper objects of intuition are not feelings, states of mind, and level in the hierarchy of things, but rather *truths, disclosures*. When the intuition is mystical—and this is what concerns us here—then the objects of this intuition are “the secrets of the other world”.

“*Mukāshafab*”, says Ghazali, “is a light which appears in the heart after it is purified of its blamable characteristics. Through this light are revealed many matters of which one had heard only the name and about which one had imagined vague and general meanings. As a result the meanings become clear until one has true knowledge of the nature of God<sup>4</sup>...His attributes...His Acts...the meaning of the terms angels and devils...the meaning of prophecy, prophet, and the meaning of revelation...”<sup>5</sup> etc...

The immediacy in this experience is that the conclusion or the insight is arrived at without the benefit of inference. It is a sudden overwhelming ‘seeing that’ which in its highest and clearest stages is accompanied by an unshakable feeling of certainty. The latter aspect of the insight is called *yaqīn*.

Having made the distinction in Ghazali’s usage of “*dhawq*” or

<sup>1</sup> *Arb.*, p. 57. Words used by Ghazali which are more or less equivalent to “*dhawq*”, in the sense of mystical intuition are: “*kasbf*”, also “*mukāshafab*” (uncovering, or disclosure), these stand for what is like a light which appears in the heart (*Ih.* I, 1, *bāb* 2, 2nd *bayān*, p. 18); “*mushābadah yaqīniyyah*”, or vision beyond doubt (*Ih.* III, 1, 6th *bayān*, p. 14); “*ilbām*” (inspiration) when, to speak theistically, God takes the initiative in disclosing and when the recipient is a saint, and “*wahī*” (revelation) when the recipient is a prophet (*Ibid.*, 8th *bayān*, p. 16).

<sup>2</sup> *Mish.*, p. 83; “perceptive faculty” is Gairdner’s equivalent of the original Arabic word “*idrāk*”.

<sup>3</sup> “*mukāshafab*” is mostly used in the *Ihyā’*. There it is contrasted with “*mukāshafab*” which names the “science” of moral and spiritual self-purification of the mystic. “*dhawq*” occurs mostly in later books such as the *Munniqidh*, *Arba’in* and *Mishkāt*. In so far as *dhawq* as intuition and *mukāshafab* are essentially the same, the use of “*dhawq*” in later writings does not introduce a new doctrine of a faculty above reason as Watt contends in his article, “The Authenticity of Works Attributed to al-Ghazālī” in *J.R.A.S.* 1952, pp. 26-28.

<sup>4</sup> Which ‘knowledge’, as Ghazali often tells us, may be that God is unknowable. See second quotation on p. 37 of this chapter.

<sup>5</sup> *Ih.* I, 1, *bāb* 2, 2nd *bayān*, p. 18.

immediate experience (going through, and non-inferentially seeing that) we must now answer the question of whether God’s Essence can be known in either way.

Taking the first sense, going through, it is obviously impossible for man to know God by going through the level of godliness. Thus Ghazali says,

“There are two ways to knowing God, one is inadequate the other barred. As for the inadequate, it is in mentioning the Names and Attributes (of God) and the manner of analogy to what we have known in ourselves... The second way which is barred is for the servant of God to wait until he acquires all the traits of divinity<sup>1</sup> until he becomes divine...but it is impossible for this essence to be had by anyone other than God...it is impossible for anyone to know God truly except God.”<sup>2</sup>

If it is impossible (logically) to know God’s essence through immediate experience in the sense of going through or becoming, is it perhaps possible, without *becoming* God, to know His Essence intuitively? The answer is an unqualified no. As a matter of fact one must say at this point that it does not matter what the sense of the verb “to know” is, God’s nature cannot be known by man, *be he mystic or prophet*.<sup>3</sup> Neither reason *nor intuition* can fathom His Essence.

This uncompromising agnosticism—concerning God’s nature not His existence—is thus radically different from the usual view that God, while not knowable to the senses and to reason, may yet be known by mystical intuition. We shall have to see whether Ghazali has chosen for himself an impossible position.

#### *Why This Uncompromising Agnosticism*

There are two considerations which account for Ghazali’s uncompromising agnosticism as regards God’s nature.<sup>4</sup> The first is a logical consideration. Given the meaning of “utterly unique” it is logically impossible for a being who is utterly unique to be known by man. If God’s nature is utterly unlike anything man knows then it is

<sup>1</sup> This must refer to whatever makes God divine (qua divine), not to the theistic attributes that we talk about throughout this essay and which the mystic seeks to ‘acquire’. *Maq.*, p. 21.

<sup>2</sup> Ghazali continues, “Indeed I say it is impossible for anyone to know the prophet except the prophet. He who has no prophecy in him can know prophecy only in name.” *Ibidem*.

<sup>3</sup> *Ih.* I, 2, *fasl* 2, p. 90; see also *Maq.*, p. 22; *Arb.*, p. 61; *Mish.*, p. 60

<sup>4</sup> For a different kind of consideration underlying the two discussed here see pp. 60 ff.

impossible to know Him, for, as already stated,<sup>1</sup> Ghazali believes that all knowledge is in terms of what is familiar; all knowledge involves some recognition. Therefore what is *utterly* unfamiliar, it is logically impossible to know.

Thus the uncompromising character of Ghazali's agnosticism follows logically from his uncompromising stand on the utter difference of God's nature.

The second consideration may be called Ghazali's jealousy for God's Prestige and Majesty. There is something religiously repelling for him in the thought that God in all His infinite Majesty can be fathomed by anyone, other than God Himself. The well-known Muslim phrase *Allāhu akbar* (literally, God is greater), Ghazali tells us, does not mean that God is greater than someone or something else. The mere suggestion of an other with whom God can be compared as to greatness is insulting to God. What the phrase means is that God is greater than to be known by man.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, Ghazali believes that to know is somehow to subordinate that which is known;<sup>3</sup> far be it from God to suffer such a fate. Perhaps the clearest indication of this praise motive behind Ghazali's agnosticism is when Ghazali is discussing the sense in which God is unknowable and the sense in which it may be said that God is knowable. He remarks that although both assertions are true—each in a way that does not conflict with the other, as we shall see—to say that God is unknowable is “nearer to exaltation and respect”.<sup>4</sup> We shall see when we discuss the epistemology of attribution that the same motivation is behind Ghazali's emphasis on the *utter* difference of God.

<sup>1</sup> p. 21 *f.*, above.

<sup>2</sup> *Misb.*, p. 60; *Arb.*, p. 61.

<sup>3</sup> *Misb.*, p. 60. It is difficult to know exactly what Ghazali means by this. One can think of the Sartrean gaze which reduces another person to an object, a kind of subordination, but that is not the result of knowledge. One can also think of Nietzsche's analysis of building speculative systems as a sublimated Will to Power, except that this is a special kind of knowledge. Some indication of Ghazali's meaning is given in his analysis of man's natural desire to be like God, lord over all things. This is not intended as a basic psychological interpretation of all human behaviour as Nietzsche does with his Will to Power, but Ghazali does say that man's desire to know the stars and all the secrets of the Universe is motivated by this desire. (*Arb.*, pp. 134-135; *Ib.* III, 8, *shaṭr* 1, 6th *bayān*, pp. 243 ff). It is not unlikely that from this motivational analysis of knowledge he gets the idea that the object known is somehow subordinated.

<sup>4</sup> *Maq.*, p. 19.

#### CONCLUSION

From the above it is clear that as far as God's Essence is concerned, Ghazali maintains an uncompromising agnosticism. God's Essence cannot be defined, nor can it be known immediately whether by intuition or by the kind of knowledge one has of a feeling or role, when one goes through that feeling and that role.

There remains what we have called the knowable aspect of God, His Acts and His Attributes. What are God's Acts and Attributes? In what sense can we say that these are known by man? And how can God be knowable at all? In seeking to answer these questions we must prepare to face a more thorough agnosticism.

## CHAPTER FOUR

## THE KNOWABLE ASPECT

"On the agnosticism is reared an unintelligible gnosticism."

W. H. T. Gairdner  
*Der Islam*, V, 1914, p. 133.

## A. WHAT THE KNOWABLE ASPECT IS

When Ghazali distinguishes between God's Acts and His Attributes what he usually has in mind concerning the latter is a group of special or basic attributes which are non-relational, and according to Orthodox Islam are non-essential. These have been limited to seven: Life, Knowledge, Power, Will, Hearing, Sight, and Speech. These, however, are only some members of what we would consider the more general class of divine attributes which includes relational and non-relational attributes deriving from these seven.

The Acts of God, on the other hand, are either the *products* of God's activity, all that is and all that happens, or the *activity* itself which brings things and events about, such as the activity of creating, giving, guiding etc. These acts as activity correspond to and are the result of specific relational attributes referable to God. Thus God is Creator, Giver, Guide, etc., and he creates, gives, and guides. Therefore, God's activity could be discussed in terms of the relational attributes of activity. There remains God's Acts as products of His activity and to this we must now turn in order to find out how a knowledge of the products of God's activity can be called a knowledge of God, and what one knows about God in this way.

*Knowing God by Knowing the World*

The statement 'By knowing the world I know God' can be interpreted in several ways.

First it may mean that given certain things about the world certain beliefs would be true of God. The passage from the world-statements to the God-statements may be characterized as inference, as in the case of the traditional arguments for God's existence. But one seldom

finds Ghazali engaged in formal argumentation to prove the existence of God. Rather, for him—the testimony of the Qur'an aside for the moment—theism should be obvious to whoever ponders over and contemplates the wonders of creation.<sup>1</sup> As a matter of fact Ghazali's theist is already looking at the world theistically when he says what he does about God in the light of what he notes in the world. To know the world here means to know it theistically, under the aspect of its relation to a theistically conceived God. The relation between the world-statements and the God-statements, therefore, is not a matter of inference to a conclusion held in doubt as much as it is a matter of co-ordinating certain beliefs about God with selected world-statements, both already accepted.

Two particular points would give content to this correspondence between God-beliefs and world-statements.

1. Only God's existence is uncaused. For anything else to exist it must be brought into being. Therefore, taking anything from the point of view of mere existence we cannot omit referring to God as the ground of its existence. The metaphysical biography of everything starts with God's creative activity. Therefore, to know the mere fact that something exists is also to know that God is The Agent responsible for its existence. Thus if God is the Creator of everything, it seems we have known that much about Him even though this is not a knowledge of His Essence.

2. Furthermore, God has not only given existence to all things, He has given them the nature they have and has arranged the Universe to function the way it does. From this kind of knowledge we know, let us say, that wisdom, benevolence, and power are true of God. Not one of these attributes reveals His Essence, nor do all of them together. But if they somehow apply to God then it seems that we have known something about Him.

In these two ways—knowing the fact that the world is, and knowing what it is like—we can infer or support certain beliefs about God. What these beliefs are turns out to be accepted statements about God which attribute to Him certain characteristics. The characteristics or attributes we have mentioned are Cause, Wisdom, Benevolence and Power, and these are some of the attributes that apply to God.

The second interpretation of the statement 'By knowing God's

<sup>1</sup> *Ib.*, I, 2, *faṣl* 3, *rukn* 1, pp. 93-94.

Acts (the world) I know God', can be given in terms of Ghazali's metaphysical principle: There is no he (or it) but He.<sup>1</sup> If, in some sense, God is all, then it would seem that whatever one knows is God. This is what Ghazali has in mind when he says "I know only God". But we should not be misled by formulas here. We have already explained that for Ghazali God and the world are not identical. God's relation with the world is that of an all-pervasive Will to an utterly dependent set of things, and it would be incorrect to say that the very knowledge of the world is in itself a knowledge of God. One could say, however,—and this becomes the same as our first interpretation—that the world's dependence on God is the correlate of the belief that God is The Agent with the All-pervasive Will, and this is a case of attribution, for we are attributing agency and will to God.

A third interpretation may be briefly mentioned for the sake of completeness even though it does not apply to Ghazali's thought. This would result from the belief that God and the World are one and the same and therefore a knowledge of the world is a knowledge of God. But even here it must be remarked that a pantheist—and this position is pantheism—would not state that any item of knowledge is as such and directly a knowledge of God. For, God or the World is not simply the collection of articles we bump into in our daily experience. These many things are manifestations of one underlying essence which is God, and it is at the level of the One that God and Nature are identical. So before we can call a knowledge of an empirical datum a knowledge of God we must go through the metaphysical clearing house where God and the World are one.

#### *Knowledge of Self, Knowledge of God*

The knowledge of one particular product of God's activity needs special but brief mention and this is a knowledge of the self. Several sayings give the self a special status in relation to God. "He who knows himself has known God." Also, (God speaking), "I have breathed into him (man) of My Spirit"; and above all, "God created Adam in His Own Image". These not only seem to give a specific illustration of a case of knowing God by knowing the product of His activity, but also add fuel to the problem of how God can be utterly unlike anything and yet like something (man). Here it seems

<sup>1</sup> See Chapter Two, pp. 30-32 for an explanation of this principle.

we have a very clear cut negation of God's uniqueness, even if one were to say that the images talked about are not the visible form but rather the psychological and spiritual character.

But this should not give us pause. The question of sharing an image can be reduced to the problem of sharing attributes. The latter is the more general problem. Ghazali's position on this sharing—whether of image or of attribute—is clear and explicit. Any so-called resemblance between man and God is nothing more than the fact that the words, the mere verbal utterances without their meaning, are used in the divine and human contexts.<sup>1</sup> There is no real resemblance. God's utter uniqueness is never compromised. As we shall see more fully, no attribution conflicts with God's uniqueness since all attribution if taken in its ordinary meaning is inadequate, or false.

We have now examined what it means to call knowledge of God's Acts a knowledge of God, and we found that this reduced itself to a knowledge that certain attributes are said to apply to God. The knowable aspect of God is thus reduced to such attributes.

Having answered the question of what the knowable aspect is we now turn to the question of how, according to Ghazali, it may be known. It would seem at first that we do not have to discuss this question since what concerns us in this essay is *whether* God is known (in terms of His attributes) such that the agnosticism is contradicted. But we shall discuss the question of how God is known because in the process certain features of Ghazali's thought will be brought out which are needed either to complete the discussion of mysticism as a possible supreme test of God's unknowability, or, as in the case of Revelation, to provide material on which to build later.

#### B. HOW GOD IS KNOWN

The question of how man knows that God is such and such may be understood as a question about the various ways of knowing. On the basis of a preanalytic glance at Ghazali's thought it would seem that the ways are four: 1. *naql* (transmission) or *taqlid* (literally imitation). 2. *'aql* (demonstrative reason). 3. *dhawq* (immediate experience or intuition), or *ilbām* (inspiration), or *mukāshafah* (lit. disclosing) and, 4. *wahī* (Revelation). The overriding question in terms of which we

<sup>1</sup> *Im.* on margin of *Iḥ. I*, pp. 138, 139, (*Faṣl*; "Ma'na ifshā' sirr r-rubūbiyyah kufr").

will discuss these ways is that of the relation between Revelation—which is in a class by itself—on the one hand, and each of the other three ways. One of the issues here, of course, is whether man can know God independently of Revelation.

Moreover, these ways can either be discussed under the heading of source of knowledge or under the heading of justification. For each way can be a source of knowledge—we shall see whether this is so with Ghazali—and each provides a basis for justification. Moreover, if we introduce the concept of certainty, each promises its own yield of certainty or its own residue of doubt. We shall, therefore, discuss these ways at some length, first as possible sources of knowledge about God, and later discuss much more briefly their relation to the concepts of justification and certainty.

#### *Revelation as Primary and Ultimate Source*

Revelation is, without any qualifications, a source of knowledge about God. More specifically it is the (only) primary and ultimate source. It is *the authoritative* source. It is the final standard in terms of which the adequacy of any other source is judged. It is the content that measures the correctness of any other content. This authoritative primacy immediately gives Revelation an ultimacy both as a source and a basis for justification. It is *the source* to settle for in the end because it is the *authoritative infallible* source. Because it is the authoritative source it is also the ultimate source in the sense that other sources, more immediate in relation to the believer, in the end and in one way or another depend on Revelation for the content they supply. This will be clear when we discuss the other ways.

#### *Taqlid or Naql*

According to Ghazali one may believe that God is such and such on the authority of some trusted person or persons. Two defining features of this should be singled out. The first is that this way requires on the part of the believer an attitude of simple unquestioning acceptance. Second, the trusted authority in this case is not a religious authority. It is not the Prophet or the Qur'ān, but parents and teachers, or, more generally, a tradition of belief handed down from past generations.

Since the authority in this case is not that of the Prophet or any other religious authority, but of other trusted persons, this mode of acceptance is not what is often called the method of authority in religious epistemology. It is a non-religious authority on religious

matters. Yet the same unquestioning acceptance of a trusted source can be adopted in relation to a religious source, say the Qur'ān, even if technically this is not called *taqlid*. Thus Ghazali lumps “bare acceptance of Qur'ān and Traditions” together with *taqlid*.<sup>1</sup>

*Taqlid*, in so far as it relies on a non-religious authority is not a source of content about God except in a biographical and, for our purposes, epistemologically unimportant sense. And in so far as what it yields practically depends on hearsay such content is not sufficiently certified to be called knowledge. Only in a loose sense can the believer who relies on this method say, “I know that God is such and such by *taqlid*”. Past generations have come by this content from some other source. It is not an original source. In other words, biographically, and in relation to a believer's previous state of ignorance *taqlid* may be called a source of content about God. But it implies some other source on which it depends. For even if each generation had only the previous generation for its source, at least the first generation could not have gotten its content about God through *taqlid*.

#### *'Aql*

Reason is a little more promising as a possible independent source. A minor difficulty should be cleared up first. The term “*'aql*”, as Ghazali himself points out, is ambiguous. It refers commonly in the usage of theologians to demonstrative reason. It is the activity (or faculty) that proves, defends, elicits conclusions implied by premises. In a more general sense, *'aql* is man's basic apprehending faculty, that which distinguishes him from animals, that by which he has theoretical knowledge.<sup>2</sup> But the term also refers to the sufi, “light of inner perception” or “light of certainty (*yaqīn*)”.<sup>3</sup> Ghazali maintains that “*'aql*” as man's basic reason-instinct (*gharīzatu l-'aql*) refers to the same thing denoted by the sufi terms just mentioned. Thus while Ghazali distinguishes the mystical apprehension from *'aql* as demonstrative reason, he identifies it with *'aql* as the basic human apprehending faculty.<sup>4</sup> But if the sufi terms have a strict meaning such that they are exchangeable with the term *dhawq* then the identification is

<sup>1</sup> *Munq.* p. 28. The technical word “Tradition” (with capital “T”) refers to the sayings of the Prophet, hence to a religious source, and should be distinguished from the word “tradition” in the usual sense.

<sup>2</sup> *Ih* I, 1, *bāb* 7, 2nd *bayān*, p. 75.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 79

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem.*

misleading. Let us for the purpose of clarification conceive of faculties as entities or things. Then one might express Ghazali's view by saying that reason and mystical apprehension do not refer to two distinct things or entities, but to the same entity. However what is misleading about this identification is that *dhawq* and 'aql, in the broad sense, are not coordinate categories. The one, 'aql, is an elemental or basic category, while *dhawq* is a derivative category, a more specific mode of exercising the reason-instinct.<sup>1</sup> We shall therefore keep 'aql distinct from mystical intuition or *dhawq*. In our discussion of 'aql as a source of knowledge we shall be primarily concerned with demonstrative reason, although we shall refer to man as supplying content about God, in the broad sense of man the 'natural' rational animal, and in contrast with Revelation.<sup>2</sup>

Ghazali acknowledges that there could be a source of content about God other than Revelation. Perhaps the clearest and most explicit passage is in the *Iqtisād*<sup>3</sup> where Ghazali refers to what may be known by reason<sup>4</sup> without the Law, by the Law without reason, and by both. This possibility of knowing by reason is also implicit wherever Ghazali seeks to arrive at some content about God after a process of rational demonstration. Moreover, in discussing the use of attributes about God in the *Maqṣad*<sup>5</sup> Ghazali gives man<sup>6</sup> licence to use attributes even if these did not appear in the Law so long as these attributes do not suggest or imply any imperfection.

Yet there are important qualifications with respect to the independence of such a source which follow from the authoritative primacy of Revelation. Regardless of the alternative source, man may not come up with any content explicitly or implicitly opposed to

<sup>1</sup> The same relation would hold between *dhawq* and *qalb* (heart). The term "qalb" in its epistemological sense is one of the synonyms of 'aql, in the broad sense. (*Iḥ* III, 1, 1st *bayān*, p. 4).

<sup>2</sup> What Ghazali calls man's *fiṭra* is not another faculty or source of knowledge, rather it is the unprejudiced un-accultured state of man's basic apprehending faculty.

<sup>3</sup> *Iq.*, p. 86. Incidentally, this passage appears at the beginning of the second *bāb* of the fourth *qutb* of the book, not the second part of the book as stated in Gardet-Anawati, *Introduction a la Théologie Musulmane*, p. 429.

<sup>4</sup> "bi-dalili l-'aql", this reference is to demonstrative reason. Strictly speaking the latter does not originate knowledge. It is not a source in this sense, and one is more likely to look at it as a way of justification. One can however, speak of it as a source in so far as it elicits what is implied in any given content. It is closer to a catalyst than to an originative source.

<sup>5</sup> *Maq.*, pp. 83-85

<sup>6</sup> The independence here is spoken of in terms of man not in terms of any of his faculties.

revealed content. If Ghazali were presented with such content he would either reject it as he did with the Philosophers' theses in the *Tabāfut*, or interpret it to harmonize with Revelation as he did with mystic claims of identification with God. Even when demonstrative reason comes up with conclusions textually different but not opposed to Revelation, these conclusions, one would have to say, must be ones in fact deduced from some revealed content, or they must be deducible therefrom, or must be at least logically compatible with—if not actually deduced or deducible from—revealed truth. The first possibility, in fact deduced, reduces reason to an elaborator and explicator of the revealed creed. The second possibility, deducible but not in fact deduced, allows reason more freedom. The premises according to this possibility are not revealed text. This gives reason what may be called procedural independence. Thus reason could choose for its premises some fact about the world—motion or the causal relation—and conclude that there is a First Mover or a First Cause. Neither conclusion would have been in fact deduced from any Qur'anic text but with proper interpretation they could be said to be implied by the first part of the verse "He is the First and the Last...".<sup>1</sup> The third possibility, merely compatible, could be illustrated in terms of the demonstrative activity. However, what brought it to mind is the passage in the *Maqṣad* just referred to, where man is given licence for the choice of attributes just so long as they do not suggest or imply imperfection. The specific content of such attributes is in no further way specified, except that it is understood, of course, that the attributes should not oppose Revelation by their specific content.

One other licence is given to man. He may specify the content of Revelation when this is not sufficiently clear or explicit. He may also give symbolic interpretation (*ta'wil*) to anthropomorphic passages in the Qur'ān, and determine what should and should not be interpreted.<sup>2</sup>

But with all such licence and such freedom man's reason, in both the broad and narrow senses, primarily works with given revealed content. It can amplify, specify, or interpret given primary religious premises. It cannot independently supply the whole set of such pre-

<sup>1</sup> S. lvii, 3.

<sup>2</sup> In one instance (*Iḥ*. I, 2, *faṣl* 2, p. 92) this licence is given to the "light of *yaqīn*".

mises.<sup>1</sup> Whatever little it can independently conclude is already explicitly or implicitly contained in the revealed texts. Whatever attributes it chooses to add are not going to be basic or authoritative like the ones already revealed. Finally at no point can reason contradict or overrule Revelation. If, therefore, in what follows we concern ourselves with Revelation as practically the only source of content about God it is because what matters for our discussion is the complete authoritative content which only Revelation can supply.

We come now to mystical knowledge — another source that one ordinarily considers as an alternative to Revelation. This will require a fuller treatment since a few questions specially relating to it need to be considered.

### C. MYSTICAL KNOWLEDGE

#### *Some Special Questions*

While our main concern here is to consider the possibility of *dhawq* or mystical intuition as a source of knowledge, this matter can best be handled by discussing the question of the dependence or independence of intuition from God's revealing act. Ghazali distinguishes between disclosure to a saint or mystic which he calls *ilhām* and disclosure to a prophet which is *wahī* or revelation proper. Before we find out how the two differ we should note that the question of the independence of mystical intuition from God's disclosing agency becomes two questions. First, is *dhawq* as intuition a source of knowledge independent from *wahī*, or, more specifically, is it independent from the historical Qur'anic revelations to the Prophet Muhammad? The other question, a less important one, is whether mystical intuition, as a relation which ordinarily is supposed to take place between man and God, yields content about God independently of God's initiative to disclose.

In the latter question it is supposed that the mystical relation is a relation between man and God. Two further questions suggest themselves here about Ghazali's thought. Are the disclosures revealed

<sup>1</sup> Ghazali prefers to look at reason as a defender not a source of religious belief, (*Ib.* I, 2, *faṣl* 2, p. 86). To defend, in this case, is not an epistemological task but a socio-religious one. It means to protect the faith from, and make it convincing to the unbelievers.

to man directly by God or are they sent through the mediation of other beings such as angels? The other question is whether mystical intuition is a relation between man and God in direct confrontation.

These latter two questions are not the same. This may be seen in the possibility that God may appear to the mystic, in the sense of causing content about Himself to appear in the mystic's heart, without intermediary agency (the relation is direct in this sense) but without confrontation (the relation would not be direct in this sense).

These four questions—concerning the relation to Revelation, the relation to God's disclosing initiative, the directness or indirectness of God's revealing initiative, and the possibility of confrontation—will be discussed in the reverse order to the one in which they were stated.

#### *Direct Confrontation*

There are many passages in Ghazali that seem to suggest a direct confrontation between the mystic or saint and God Himself; some more so than others. Thus, "there is no veil between you and Him except your pre-occupation with aught else."<sup>1</sup> Or, "they know the attributes and witness (*yushāhidūna*) the one whom (these attributes) describe."<sup>2</sup> Or, again, "this witnessing in which nothing appears except the One, the Real..."<sup>3</sup> Also, speaking of the mystics who attain the highest level, he says "(these) whom 'the splendours of the Countenance sublime consume', and the majesty of the Divine Glory obliterate..."<sup>4</sup>

Of course it is not unlike many thinkers, and this applies particularly to Ghazali, to use language that seems to imply what the rest of their thought forbids them to hold. Think of the headaches Ghazali has given over his use of Neoplatonic language.

Seeming explicit support notwithstanding, Ghazali cannot and does not in the end maintain the view that man confronts God. We shall claim later,<sup>5</sup> when we analyze the assertions made about God under the claim of 'knowledge', that such a confrontation is not even neces-

<sup>1</sup> *Ib.* IV, 4, *shātr* 1, 1st *bayān*, p. 165.

<sup>2</sup> *Imlā'*, margin *Ib.* I, p. 62.

<sup>3</sup> *Ib.* IV, 5, *shātr* 1, 2nd *bayān*, p. 213. See also as other sample references on the same point, *Misb.* p. 60, 97; *Im.* margin *Ib.* I, p. 130, or *bayān* on fourth stage of *tawhid*.

<sup>4</sup> *Misb.* p. 97.

<sup>5</sup> See discussion in Chapter Six pp. 93 ff., and Chapter Seven, pp. 103 ff.

sary for the making of those assertions. Despite the language of direct vision and despite references to the vivid presence of God, a careful understanding of Ghazali's thought reveals that the mystical 'cognitive' relationship is not conceived to be the non-physical analogue of the subject-object confrontation in perception.<sup>1</sup> In the case of knowing God and unlike the case of perceiving physical objects there is no need for face to face presence. Whether the relation should continue to be called mystical or not will be taken up at the close of our discussion of mystical knowledge.

That no direct 'contact' takes place between man and God is shown by the many explicit statements to this effect. A sample of such quotations will be given when we discuss the third of our recently posed questions. These will state that God reveals to man only through the intermediacy of angels or from behind a veil. This implicitly rules out direct confrontation as a source of knowledge.

More crucial and more interesting than the fact that Ghazali does not hold to the notion of cognitive confrontation between man and God is that he cannot hold to the notion of confrontation at all, whether the relation is that of knowledge or some other religious relation. This should make it clear anew why the mystical goal cannot be a union in any but a metaphorical sense. For a non-metaphorical sense implies initial confrontation.

It might be tempting at first to account for the impossibility of confrontation by reference to the familiar pair of negative characteristics, the uniqueness and unknowability of God. These not only make it logically impossible for any man including the mystic to know God under any aspect—thus even 'I know God in terms of His attributes' is logically impossible unless interpreted—it makes it specifically impossible for God to become an object of direct cognition. If God cannot be known at all, then He cannot be known by direct confrontation. But this still does not show that the direct confrontation is impossible. It only shows that knowledge by such confrontation is not possible. We must seek an answer elsewhere.

### *The Divine For Itself*

There is a profound perspectival insight in Ghazali's thought which underlies much of his thinking about God. Unfortunately it is not

<sup>1</sup> In this we agree with Jabre. See his *La Notion de la Ma'rifa chez Ghazali*, pp. 80 ff.

a routine variety of theological doctrine expressed in some particular passage or page. It is difficult to point to it. Yet the reader of Ghazali can, perhaps dimly, sense it lurking behind all of the related concepts of the uniqueness of God, His unknowability, especially His Holiness and Majesty. Any attempt to interpret the Ghazalian or Muslim conception of God merely from the standpoint of religious need, and thus lament the aloofness or unavailability which are prominently part of that conception, misses one of the powerful insights that characterize Islam.

It is difficult to capture this perspectival insight in words. It is a way of looking at the divine for its own sake, a way of thinking about it as if nothing else existed. If religion is essentially the area of the relation between man and the divine, this perspective in Islam broadens the scope of the religious to include this concern for the divine as if man were not in the picture.

It is of great power and sublimity for all theistic religions—and Islam is included of course—to bring the divine, the *absolute*, the *highest being* into a relation of care and concern for man: God makes covenants with man, He comes to earth as a person to die for his sins, or sends prophets to lead him to the Straightforward Path. But there is the profoundest extension of the horizon of the religious in thinking about the divine in itself, for itself, as if nothing else existed; and not in relation to the human scene, or the physical world. God created the Heavens and Earth. He cares for man. But God is also above creating, above caring, above relation. How low is the ceiling of that God-and-man universe. How infinitely open, how shatteringly vast, how breathlessly mystifying is that world where godliness is alone, beyond any ken, beyond any relation, holy ("*muqaddasun*", sanctified above), majestic. This insight, to be sure, is not confined to Ghazali, nor to Islam, but is found in all theistic religions, even perhaps in all religions. But among the theistic religions Islam gives it an especially resonant ring, and this in my judgement is one of the marks of its greatness as a religion.

We have referred to this insight as perspectival. This emphasizes the fact that the insight is not in itself a doctrine. It is rather a way of looking at the divine which inclines the adherent toward making or emphasizing certain doctrinal assertions rather than others. In this respect it is akin to an attitude which itself has no doctrinal status although it could be detected, partly, in the choice of beliefs. This consideration means that strictly speaking we cannot say that a per-



spectival insight logically implies some doctrine. It would be more proper to say that in the light of such an attitude, or viewing things from this perspective, such or such a doctrinal assertion is likely or unlikely, thinkable or unthinkable. Thus when we say that Ghazali *cannot* maintain the belief in direct confrontation we mean it first in this sense, of would not, or, more strongly, it is unthinkable that he would—given the perspectival insight just discussed.

Furthermore, it is possible that the perspectival insight should express itself in terms of some doctrinal assertion which itself logically forbids direct confrontation. For example one could consider the assertion that God is above relation<sup>1</sup> to be a doctrinal result of that perspectival insight. Given this assertion, it would be logically impossible for man and God to enter into any confrontation, for this is a kind of relation. Ghazali, then, cannot advocate confrontation between man and God in this second sense of it being logically impossible for him to do so—given the doctrinal result just mentioned.

#### *Confrontation and the Knowable Aspect*

If declaring God above relation is to be taken seriously, and we find no reason not to do so, then we find ourselves far beyond merely showing that confrontation between man and God is not possible. One wonders what becomes of the positive relating aspect of God, about which Ghazali as a theist speaks so amply. One wonders also what becomes of man's religion and his religious relations with God.

God is above relations, yet one can say He relates Himself to the world and to man. This raises one of our more general problems: How can anything be said about the unique, unknowable God? Or, specifically in this case, how can God to whom the concept of relation does not apply, be characterized by relational attributes? The full answer to this problem will have to await Chapter Seven. For the moment let us say that according to Ghazali no words can adequately describe God's nature under any aspect, including God's relation to man and the world. Yet God is pictured to man in terms of positive attributes and relations, in language he can understand. The point is that what is said positively about God does not have an informative descriptive function with respect to God, but has a practical directing function in relation to man's life. It is, therefore, logically possible

<sup>1</sup> *Mish.*, p. 72. Ghazali gives another reason for this. He says, "...to bear relation to what is imperfect carries with it imperfection." *Ibidem.*

to make such positive assertions, relational and non-relational, with God as subject.

Suppose then that the positive aspect of God is logically possible, can the mystic then have a relation of confrontation with God in the positive relating aspect of His nature? There are two answers to this, one pertains to cognition and depends on the doctrine of intermediacy in the knowledge relationship, the other on the very conception of the knowable or the positive relating aspect of God's nature.

The first answer has already been mentioned. Ghazali explicitly maintains that God is only known through the intermediacy of an angel.<sup>1</sup> In terms of our analysis this means that the mystic comes to know the knowable aspect or the attributes only through angelic mediation. Confrontation with God in his positive relating aspect is ruled out in knowledge, for confrontation is a specific kind of unmediated relation. Thus the mystic can only be said to know God in the sense that he knows that God is such and such.

The more basic answer concerns the reality-status of the positive aspect of God. The knowable aspect or the positive relating aspect is not an item in the scheme of things nor is it part of something which exists, not even in the abstract sense in which God may be referred to by the theist as an item in existence. As to God's existence, if that theist and the atheist were each to make an inventory of all that is, then the list of the atheist would be one item shorter since, according to the theist, the atheist did not notice God. (Let us assume their lists agree on all else). But Ghazali, as this theist, would enter the item God on his list as referring to something simple in nature. What we have called the positive aspect would not be entered as a sub-item, or as a metaphysical part of God. It is a conception of God presented to man to direct his religious life. Thus the mystical relation as a relation between man and God in His positive aspect is

<sup>1</sup> It is not unlikely that by virtue of this device Ghazali hopes to save some of the remoteness of God while at the same time 'keeping contact' between the divine and the human. This is not the first time in the history of thought that the infinite and the finite are linked by intermediaries of mixed status. It may be worthwhile to investigate the so-called Ghazali-problem (See Gairdner on this in *Der Islam* V, 1914, pp. 121-153) from this point of departure. For other suggestions on the Ghazali-problem see Wensinck "On the Relation Between Ghazali's Cosmology and His Mysticism", *Akad. Van Wetten-Schappen Mededeeling*, Ser. A, Vol. 75, 1933, pp. 19-20; and Jabre, *La Notion de Certitude Selon Ghazali*, n. 2 p. 199 ff.

immediately not a relation with a metaphysical other, but with a positive conception—authorized by Revelation, as we shall see—of an otherwise unique unknowable God who is above any description and any relation. The idea of confrontation between the mystic and ‘God Himself’ (in His positive aspect) is ruled out. We have already seen that a relation—confrontation or otherwise—with the unique unknowable God who is above relation is also ruled out.

It may seem odd to say that God may be referred to as an ‘item in existence’, but that the positive relating aspect of His nature has no such metaphysical status. It only has a doctrinal status. Ghazali may himself be startled at such a way of putting a conclusion implied in his thought. So would any practicing theist. Ghazali, the practicing theist, the defender of orthodoxy would be startled. But Ghazali the philosopher of religion should not be startled, for this follows from the reduction of the positive or knowable aspect to the set of human-language attribute-statements which are descriptively inadequate when applied to God. This is not to say that metaphysically God ‘has no positive aspect’ in Himself or to Himself. It means that as far as man is concerned the positive aspect of God is a human language picture of God not a metaphysical entity nor part of one.

One seemingly alarming consequence of the ‘startling’ conclusion just discussed needs comment. If religion be understood as at least the sphere of the relation between man and God, then what becomes of all religious relations? Or, more summarily, what becomes of religion?

A religious relation may be at either of two levels. It may be a relation *to* the creed—usually some official creed—or it may be a relation *according to* the creed, either some official creed or perhaps one’s own set of religious beliefs. One supreme relation according to the creed is the relation to what is held as divine, God, in the case of the theist.

The relation to the creed is obviously possible, and it is very important in Ghazali’s thought, and in Islam generally. In fact it is, in a sense, the more primary of the two relations. Temporally, the relation to the creed precedes the relation according to it. Logically it is also prior, for the relation according to the creed, for those who consciously follow it, implies a relation to it. Teleologically, however, the relation to the creed is not as important as the relation according to it. For the understanding and acceptance of the creed is not an end in itself. It is accepted to be lived, to be followed. But how can

man, or specifically, the mystic, be said to relate himself to God when the unknowable aspect is above relation, and when the knowable aspect is a conception of God (presented to man in language he can understand for the purpose of guiding his life)? If the reality-status of the knowable aspect is conceptual—in the sense of doctrinal, not of subjective idea—then is not the mystic relating himself to a conception of God when he claims to relate himself to God in his knowable aspect? And if the knowable aspect is the set of positive attribute-assertions that constitute the creed, is not the mystic who claims to be relating himself to God according to the creed actually relating himself to that credal conception of God? It would seem that for Ghazali relation to God according to the creed is a species of the relation to the creed.

Should Ghazali, then, abandon the language of direct relation between man and God? Two considerations would give him the perfect right to retain such language.

First, devotional practice has always tended to entify the deity, and also to use the language of direct personal transaction, even of confrontation and union, no matter what the doctrinal inhibitions may have been.<sup>1</sup> In religion, if anywhere, practice has often gone its way paying little or no heed to theory. Ghazali as a practicing theist was not, and probably would not have been affected by the implications of his own philosophico-religious ideas. As a matter of fact he did not carry these ideas toward the total fulfilment of their intellectual potential. But then how many theists have dared?

Second, what could also make it possible for Ghazali to continue to use the language of direct relation with God, even of confrontation, is a certain ambiguity in the reference of such statements as ‘God has appeared to me’, or ‘I am totally absorbed in God’, or ‘I love God’. All of these could refer to the *subject God* as known through and described in the creed. It is God whom the mystic ‘knows’ and loves, but it is the God who is the subject of credal discourse. With perfect religious authenticity he can speak of a sudden personal illumination and personal appropriation of content about God in the language of personal confrontation. He may still declare ‘God appeared to me’.

<sup>1</sup> It might seem to some that we are putting the cart before the horse. We seem to claim that the devotional practice introduces the entification and the mode of direct personal transaction instead of being based on their antecedent presence. Unfortunately, this is not the place for us to elaborate on, or support our assumed point.

Ghazali's believer is much in the position of someone to whom some person who is away is authentically described. With perfect propriety, although in a special sense, one can say that this believer knows the remote person. He may also love him, respect him, even address his utterances to him. In one sense it is the person he loves, and talks to. In another sense what he knows is a description whose subject is the remote person. In the case of love, unlike knowledge, it would not make sense to say that the believer loves the description, but it is the subject as described, or through the description, that he loves. In this special and incomplete sense the contact may be said to be with a creed. But lest this religious relation thus described seem trivialized, we must say that a creed is not just words. It is meanings pointing beyond themselves. For the believer, they authoritatively point to God.

Thus while doctrinally confrontation between man and God is not possible, the language of confrontation, or of any direct relation, can be legitimately retained. This answers the fourth of our recently posed questions. Some of the other three have been touched on in the course of our discussion of the fourth. We shall now consider the other questions briefly.

#### *Mediation of Angels*

While God may not 'personally' appear, in the sense in which this has been denied, Ghazali maintains that He may cause content about Himself to appear in the heart of the believer; not through His direct agency, however. The notion of *ilhām*<sup>1</sup> seems to point to an unmediated transmission of content about God. But in that very discussion of *ilhām* in the *Ihyā'* Ghazali states that God reveals to man only through the mediation of an angel.<sup>2</sup> Ghazali also quotes the Qur'anic verse<sup>3</sup> in which it is said that God communicates to man from behind a veil. A similar thought is behind the injunction to man to turn away from the contemplation of God, His Essence and His Attributes, and instead to contemplate His Creation.<sup>4</sup> God cannot become the direct object of cognition.

<sup>1</sup> As explained in parts of 8th-10th *bayān*, of *Ih.* III, 1, pp. 16 ff.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16; *Ih.* I, 1, 5, p. 43; Also *Imlā'*, margin *Ih.*, pp. 150-151. The view of *angelic* mediation in Revelation does not contradict the different Islamic view that man may seek God and his salvation without *ecclesiastical* intercession.

<sup>3</sup> Sxliv, 51.

<sup>4</sup> *Ih.* IV, 9, p. 361, and *Ibid.*, 2nd *bayān*, p. 370; *Mish.*, p. 95.

Even the prophet receives his revelations through the intermediacy of an angel. The difference, according to Ghazali, between the prophet and the saint is not in the actual content, nor its receiving faculty (or its 'place' as Ghazali puts it), nor its cause, but in the fact that the prophet sees the intermediary agent, the angel, whereas the saint knows not how nor from whence came his disclosures.<sup>1</sup> This should be completed by the point made elsewhere<sup>2</sup> that prophetic revelation is the ultimate infallible authoritative source of content about God, whereas strictly speaking the *sufi's ilhām* or *dhawq* depends, though not blindly, upon the prophetic source. Of course, there is the non-epistemological difference that to the prophet is revealed the Law according to which all men shall live. The prophet is selected to reform people.<sup>3</sup>

The notions of *ilhām* and of intermediacy in revelation are compatible, since *ilhām* like *dhawq* is a sudden 'seeing that'. It is an immediacy of illumination and is perfectly compatible with the view that the content thus illumined was transmitted through mediation.<sup>4</sup>

#### *God's Disclosing Initiative*

Can the mystic have knowledge of God without God's initiative to reveal? The answer to this our second of the recent questions is clear. What the mystic (or *sufi* or saint) knows is a gift from God.<sup>5</sup> The mystic can only prepare his soul or heart and await the overtures of God. The knowledge comes not by his effort. This then shows that for Ghazali mystical knowledge, like any knowledge of God, is not independent from some kind of divine revelation.

#### *Mysticism and Qur'anic Revelation*

The question that remains is whether mystical knowledge is independent of the historic Qur'anic revelation—namely, whether the

<sup>1</sup> *Ibidem.* In *Munq.* p. 61, however, the saint is said to see and hear the angels! It is difficult to decide how seriously and how pervasively to take Ghazali's doctrine of angelic mediation, especially in view of the many references to God sending forth a light into man's heart, and the like, without any trace of angelic mediation. Perhaps the latter doctrine could be taken as a symbolic way of emphasizing that God cannot be an object of direct contact, and that Ghazali resorts to it occasionally as one of the ways of making that point.

<sup>2</sup> pp. 54 ff. above, and pp. 67 f. below.

<sup>3</sup> *Ih.* I, 1, 5, 10th *bayān*, p. 22.

<sup>4</sup> Here we agree with Jabre's interpretation of *ilhām*. See Jabre, *La Notion de Certitude Selon Ghazali*, pp. 175 ff.

<sup>5</sup> *Ih.* III, 1, 8th *bayān*, p. 16; *Ma.* p. 68.

mystic is a recipient of special revelations that are occurrences distinct from the revelations of Muhammad even if they have no chance of being different in content.<sup>1</sup> If mystic revelations are not and cannot be different in content, then mysticism is not an independent source of knowledge in any important sense. At most it might be a numerically independent source, in the sense of being numerically distinct, but not independent in a logical-epistemological sense. It is not the kind of source to which someone acquainted with the content of prophetic revelation might turn for either additional or elaborated content. As a matter of fact it is misleading to speak of mysticism as a source of content. It is more accurate to speak of mystical disclosures<sup>2</sup> in Ghazali's thought, as an immediate (non-inferential) mode of apprehending existing content.<sup>3</sup> Ghazali can still narrate this in terms of God's initiative. God opens the heart of the mystic to the indubitable truth of Qur'anic revelation.

From the above discussion it should be clear that Revelation is the only ultimate and authoritative source of basic content about God. The other three ways, *naql*, *'aql*, and *dhawq*, in the end, to a greater or lesser extent, depend on Revelation as their primary source and stand corrected by it should they seek to amplify or explicate revealed content.

#### *Ghazali and the Label "Mystical"*

Our interpretation of Ghazali's thought in this chapter and also in Chapter Two, inevitably leads to the well-known question: Does the label "mystical" apply to Ghazali's thought at any point?<sup>4</sup>

In Chapter Two we noted that the 'closest' relation between man and God, according to Ghazali, is not unitive, except in a metaphorical sense. Man and God remain distinct and cannot become

<sup>1</sup> Whatever is revealed to the saint has been also revealed to the Prophet, but not necessarily the converse.

<sup>2</sup> On *mukāshafah* see *Ih* I, 1, *bāb* 2, 2nd *bayān*, p. 18; quoted on p. 46 above.

<sup>3</sup> It does not degrade the sufi to say that his way is not an originative source of content about God. For according to Ghazali his glory still lies in three things which he possesses uniquely among the lot of believers: 1. He sees 'for himself' that the revealed content is true and does not accept it on blind authority. 2. He attains a degree of certainty beyond doubt in his acceptance of such content, and 3. His acceptance is not mere intellectual assent, but is above all an inner change and personal appropriation. More will be said on this in the rest of the chapter.

<sup>4</sup> This should be distinguished from the biographical question which does not concern us here, whether Ghazali himself was a mystic.

identical. In this chapter we have contended that any talk by Ghazali of a direct confrontation (non-unitive) between man and 'God Himself' should not be taken at its face value. While the use of the language of confrontation and direct relation is understandable and legitimate it cannot be legitimate because of any direct encounter between man and the being or person of God. Lest it should seem that it is the symbolic terms 'confrontation' and 'person' which rule out the direct relation with God because they suggest a restricted mode of relation, we should say more clearly and more broadly that the result of Ghazali's thought, as analyzed here, amounts to a denial of the possibility of any direct experience of the divine. Ghazali's sufi at most is left in ecstasy over truths about God—accepted and appropriated in a special way—but not God. Furthermore, what we have called mystical intuition, *dhawq*, is not an originative source of content about God. It is not noetic in this sense. Man's closest relation to God consists in an inner appropriation of God's character as disclosed in the authorized characterization, an understanding, acceptance, and inner assurance of the truth of revealed content, and the contemplation, adoration, love of God as subject of the authorized characterization. Where, it may be said, is the direct unitive noetic experience of God without which the term 'mystical' would not apply? Is, then, Ghazali's conception of the relation between man and God such that it could be called a mystical relation?

In a way the answer could be very simple. If by 'mystical relation' is meant 'a relation between man and God which is unitive, or, at least, is a relation of direct confrontation', then Ghazali's conception of the relation between man and God cannot be called mystical, and we should withdraw our use of the terms "mystic", "mystical", and "mysticism" in analyzing Ghazali's thought. But the precise answer is otherwise, and is more complex.

It must be recalled that Ghazali does use the language of confrontation and directness in speaking of the highest relation between man and God, and even speaks of that relation in terms akin to the notion of union. But at the same time he explicitly and implicitly makes it impossible for the probing reader to take that language at its face value.

Let us state the problem as follows. Take Ghazali and some other writer—this one may be a mystic himself—whose references to the highest religious attainment are in unmistakable unqualified mystical language. This other writer speaks of an unitive encounter. Is it the

case that Ghazali and that writer are referring to different attainments, or are they differently interpreting what is roughly the same attainment? To put this in terms of a crude analogy, is it that Ghazali's man can only score eighty in his relation with God, while the other writer's mystic hits a hundred with the greatest ease? As is evident from our discussion in Chapter Two, we tend towards the view that Ghazali is giving a different interpretation, from the standpoint of his particular theological views, of what one suspects is roughly the same experience. We say that it is the same on the basis of the similarity at the experiential level between the experience which other mystics try to describe and the experience which Ghazali has in mind when he seeks and advocates the sufi way. At the experiential level the sufi's attainment is granted by Ghazali to be unitive, religiously ecstatic, and noetic—our discussion in Chapter Two may here be recalled. But at the doctrinal level the experiential unity should be understood in terms of the orthodox theology of *tawhid*, and the noetic content should be designated as the Revealed content. For Ghazali, the mystical experience (if we may be so bold as to call it mystical) is not noetic in the sense of supplying its own independent knowledge content.<sup>1</sup>

Thus we would maintain that at the experiential level, the experience that is had by Ghazali's man at his highest moment of reli-

<sup>1</sup> This, incidentally, is the crux of one aspect of the often vaguely stated "reconciliation between orthodoxy and mysticism" credited to Ghazali. This may be called the epistemological reconciliation with regard to the source of knowledge. One can point to four other aspects of the famous reconciliation. By making *yaqin* (certainty) a test of any truly justified religious knowledge he could maintain that the highest form of the acceptance of the Orthodox Creed is in accepting it the mystic way which is the only one yielding that desired certainty. This is also epistemological but relates to the justification and certainty of religious belief. Furthermore, in so far as the sufi or mystic way is the way of practice and inner appropriation, the most religious way for an orthodox believer is in accepting the creed as sufis do. This may be called the religious ('existential') aspect of the reconciliation. Moreover, Ghazali effected a reconciliation of attitude between the orthodox Muslims and the Sufis. Having maintained that the essential contribution of orthodoxy is its infallible revealed content and of sufism a way of experiencing and appropriating given content (this division in type of function provides the logical basis for all the aspects of the reconciliation), and having maintained that the highest religious and epistemological attainment consists in combining the true content with the true way, he now tells each group of Muslims that it cannot do without the other. Finally, the metaphysical aspect of the reconciliation, consists in maintaining that the unitive character of the mystical experience is not pantheistic in objective doctrine and is thus compatible with Orthodox theology.

gious attainment may be called mystical on the basis of its 'psychological structure'. At the doctrinal level, in spite of the language of confrontation and 'closeness' which Ghazali uses, in his considered position he would not refer to that religious attainment in such and similar traditional mystical concepts. But this is not because the attainment is not mystical but rather because Ghazali would not doctrinally accept the implications of the traditional mystical concepts used in talking about the attainment

There is no logical connection between the mystical attainment and any particular theology or metaphysical viewpoint. Thus whether the attainment is mystical or not cannot be judged by the doctrine that goes with it or interprets it. Nor, incidentally, can one decide that Ghazali himself is not a mystic on the basis of what his considered theoretical doctrine is.

Another consideration that explains the justified use of the label "mystical" in connection with Ghazali's thought may be first stated in terms of the similar problem in the use of the word "God". We may seriously hesitate to refer to money as God, or a god, if someone 'worships' it and dedicates his life to its acquisition. In fact one would say that the term "god" could apply to money only in a borrowed or analogical sense. But that would not be a legitimate use of the religious label "god". On the other hand its use by someone like Spinoza is perfectly defensible and legitimate. Although what Spinoza calls God is not a supernatural being in the theist's sense, still it is what corresponds to it in Spinoza's thought. It is not entirely similar to the theistic conception of what a god is, but is sufficiently similar to merit the legitimate application of the label "God".

The same may be said about the use of the label "mystical". The religious attainment to which the label may apply in Ghazali's thought corresponds to the attainment in the religious systems of other writers where the term mystical is said to apply without question. Despite the differences, the similarities are sufficient to warrant its use in Ghazali's case. There is what Wittgenstein, in his most useful concept, would call a "family resemblance"<sup>1</sup> between the two instances to which the same label applies. Despite the differences there are sufficient similarities to entitle one to decide upon extending the application of the label. Unless one is stipulating the definition of a term or assuming that there is one and only one meaning which is

<sup>1</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Blackwell, p. 32e, Section 67.

the orthodox meaning of a label, one should not expect to use a label for one and only one set of rigidly specified characteristics that can be called necessary and sufficient for its application.

We have chosen to refer to some areas of Ghazali's thought as "mystical with a difference". If someone else wishes to withhold the label altogether he may do so. The issue between us is verbal and should be of no great consequence so long as we are clear as to what we are calling or not calling mystical.

#### D. JUSTIFICATION AND CERTAINTY

##### *Justification*

The four ways we have discussed as to source of knowledge are Revelation, tradition, reason, and intuition. Revelation was seen to be the source on which to some extent or other each of the others depends.

As to the question of the basis of religious knowledge, Revelation continues to have a unique status. The content of Revelation is true, and it alone is infallible, simply because it was revealed to Muhammad by God. In other words statements like 'God is X' are true and cannot be false<sup>1</sup> because according to Muhammad who is infallible,<sup>2</sup> God said "I am X".

The justificatory function of the other three ways, considered apart from the case of religious belief, may best be illustrated by an example Ghazali uses. Suppose the belief at issue is that Zayd (the Arab John Doe) is in the house. One can rely on the testimony of someone one trusts and has no reason to mistrust to believe that Zayd is in the house. Or, one can reason and infer his existence from hearing his voice while one is outside. Or, finally, one can go into the house and see him for oneself, directly and in full view.<sup>3</sup> The three bases for believing that Zayd is in the house are: trusted testimony, inference,<sup>4</sup> and immediate experience.

However, in the case of religious belief what concerns Ghazali

<sup>1</sup> We shall see in Chapter Seven that this does not apply to the *descriptive* function of statements about God.

<sup>2</sup> *Munq.*, p. 46.

<sup>3</sup> *Ib* III, 1, 6th *bayān*, pp. 13-14.

<sup>4</sup> In the example the inference is inductive, but Ghazali means to make this the way of deductive proof also.

about these three ways is not their ability to confer truth on beliefs about God. That is not needed since for him beliefs about God are already true in so far as they are revealed. No further epistemological justification is needed. No better one could be found. What concerns Ghazali about the three ways falls not on the scale of epistemological justification and truth but on the semi-epistemological semi-religious scale of the mode of appropriation and the kind of certainty open to this or that man considering a belief which is independently and antecedently true. Thus Ghazali usually refers to these three ways as *levels* of faith or belief, the stratification being based on the certainty possible at each level, and on the mode of appropriating belief that usually goes with each level.

Looked at in this light the three ways become not alternatives to Revelation as ways of justifying belief, but as three possible ways a believer has of ascertaining, to his satisfaction, and accepting the contents of Revelation. There is a complementary or a doubling up, not a substitutive function. For they and Revelation belong to two different planes. Revelation supplies the basis for the truth (or adequacy or authenticity) of religious beliefs *about* the object (or subject) *God*. The other three are ways open to a *believer* for *accepting* and *assuring himself* (with varying degrees of assurance) of what according to Ghazali is already true.

Of the three, *dhawq* is the best of such ways since it fulfills Ghazali's idea of religious belief as far as the believing subject is concerned. It alone is a mode of personal appropriation and inner commitment, and it alone yields the accompanying certainty beyond doubt.

##### *Yaqin or Certainty*

Ghazali acknowledges that the word "*yaqin*" may be used in what we will call an objective sense. An item of knowledge may be demonstratively proved to the point when one may say it is certain, meaning it is beyond actual or possible doubt.<sup>1</sup> But Ghazali in his own spiritual search was not satisfied with this kind of certainty. For, according to him, it is possible that one may not be certain of some matter of which there is no doubt. There is no doubt of the fact of death, but one may still not be certain of it. Ghazali here is using *yaqin* or cer-

<sup>1</sup> This usage, Ghazali tells us, is common among the *mutakallimin* (*Ib*. I, 1, *bāb* 6, p. 64), but he himself seems to use it also (*Munq.*, p. 63). Thus it must be included in his epistemic set of categories even though he biographically was after another and 'better' kind of certainty.

tainty in what may be called the subjective sense. It is the sense in which the Sufis use the term.<sup>1</sup>

When "the heart" has *yaqin* it is overcome by the content to be believed and is overwhelmed into acceptance. What makes us call this subjective is that the acceptance is based on a feeling of certainty that envelopes the heart, and, as we have noted, something may be objectively certain (beyond doubt) but not subjectively so. While, as is often stated in the criticism of such subjectivity, one may feel certain of some (objectively) doubtful or even false proposition, Ghazali protects himself from such a criticism by declaring that the content of which one should have such *yaqin* is the revealed content,<sup>2</sup> which of course is not only true but infallible. Subjective *yaqin*, then, does not confer truth on any content. To be soundly used it must be directed at that content which is independently true, the revealed content. This may be called the 'need' of *yaqin* for the revealed content.

One can speak of a correlate need of the revealed content for subjective *yaqin*. For it is not enough for the revealed content to be true. It may still be accepted externally, blindly and without the inner certainty. Thus the revealed content 'needs' the kind of acceptance possible with *dhawq* and the kind of *yaqin* that accompanies *dhawq* (both seeing that and personally becoming), yielding subjective *yaqin* in revealed content.

It is curious to note that while Revelation supplies the best basis, objectively speaking, for the truth of statements about God, from the point of view of the appropriating believing subject, to accept a belief simply because it is revealed ranks with mere *taqlid*. This is because the notion of accepting a belief by a subject is for Ghazali not just an epistemological act but above all a religious one. Epistemologically and objectively it is perfectly correct to accept a belief because it is revealed. Religiously and subjectively, unless such a belief is accepted by experiencing the illumination of its truth and being gripped by its certainty, and unless the belief is translated in terms of one's religious life, there is no *religious merit* in bare authoritative acceptance.

If someone were to point out to Ghazali that a non-mystic, one of the multitude, might claim the unshakable certainty that the sufi

<sup>1</sup> *Ib.*, *Ibid.*, p. 65.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*.

claims, Ghazali would say that the kind of certainty that accompanies *dhawq* which he is talking about can (empirically) only come to those who have gone through the moral and spiritual preparations that the sufi undergoes. One must assume, then, that what the non-mystic claims to have is something like mere tenacity.

#### E. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

We may now resume the main thesis of this book in a few remarks concluding our whole discussion of the unknowability-knowability of God.

1. God's Essence cannot be known. For one thing, God cannot be defined. Neither can His Essence be subsumed under a genus and given a differentia, nor can any group of terms which would have to be borrowed from their ordinary usage within the world of man, be defining.

2. Furthermore, God's Essence cannot be known by immediate experience. Man can neither rise to the level of divinity and experience a divine essence by becoming divine, nor can he have an intuitive apprehension of such an essence. An experience of this kind conflicts with God's Uniqueness and affronts His Majesty.

3. Revelation has presented man with a knowable aspect of God which is expressed in words taken from the world of man.<sup>1</sup> But despite Ghazali's point that this may be called a knowledge of God, he explicitly states that all such knowledge is *inadequate*<sup>2</sup> since God's attributes (the knowable aspect) are utterly unlike their human counterparts. *Thus to know God amounts to understanding the authoritative language about God which is expressed in human terms.*

4. The advantage that mystics and prophets have over others in knowing God (whatever the aspect) is not as to whether God is known or what is known about Him. Mystics and prophets are more awake to and more certain of the fact of His unknowability.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, they have greater understanding of, and greater certainty of belief in,

<sup>1</sup> *Ib.* I, 8, *bab* 3, p. 252.

<sup>2</sup> We may recall the quotations in Chapter One, pp. 17 f. and Chapter Three, p. 47.

<sup>3</sup> *Arb.* p. 61.

that aspect of God expressed in the language of man. Also, for mystics belief is inner appropriation.

5. As to the question of the incompatibility between the statements 'I know God' and 'I do not know God', or 'God is knowable' and 'God is unknowable', the resolution of the incompatibility, according to Ghazali's explicit statement of the problem, is by showing that it is not the same proposition which is being affirmed and denied at the same time. We have seen that it is God's Essence which is unknowable to man, but God's Acts and Attributes (or God's relational and God's non-relational but non-essential attributes) may be called knowable. Or to put it more formally, the denial, 'I do not know God's Essence', and the affirmation, 'I know God's Attributes', are not a denial and affirmation of the same proposition, and are logically compatible. This constitutes a rejection of one of the assumptions (the first) which, we said earlier, must be true if there is to be a real contradiction in Ghazali's thought.

#### *Unsatisfactory Solution*

It would seem as if the problem of how God can be both knowable and unknowable has been solved. But in fact Ghazali shows that he has not fully understood the problem implicit in his thought. It is true that he has shown that in terms of his statement of the problem the affirmation and denial are not of the same proposition, but the problem remains in spite of this. In dealing with the matter the way he did Ghazali has not taken into account the full breadth of his own agnosticism. For as we clearly saw in our first chapter and as we noted occasionally in the last two chapters it is not only God's Essence that is unknowable, but His attributes too. God is unknowable in every respect since He is unique in every respect. The unknowable aspect cannot be limited to God's Essence so long as Ghazali maintains that God's attributes are utterly different from their human counterpart and are like them only in the verbal utterance. A knowledge of God's attributes in terms of the human attributes cannot be an adequate knowledge of God if the two sets of attributes are unlike one another. Thus if the unknowable aspect is to be extended, as it should, to include God's attributes, then the seeming contradiction remains and we are right where we started.

The problem of how an utterly unique and unknowable God can

be like anything and be known, or have a knowable aspect, is essentially a logical-epistemological problem which may be solved by linguistic analysis. We shall seek to do this before long. But the problem may be taken by some as a metaphysical one needing a metaphysical solution. We shall discuss this matter in the following chapter.



## CHAPTER FIVE

## IS A METAPHYSICAL SOLUTION NECESSARY?

## A. CONTRADICTION NOTED

Writers on Islamic thought in general, and on Ghazali in particular, have pointed out the inconsistency between the two aspects of God in different ways.

Gairdner in the introduction to his translation of the *Mishkāt* says,

“The doctrine of *mukbālafah*—that the divine essence and characteristics wholly and entirely ‘differ from’ the human—appears to be asserted as this treatise’s *last* word... Nevertheless, the *Mishkāt* itself seems to be one long attempt to *modify or even negate* this its own bankrupt conclusion.”<sup>1</sup>

Regardless of Gairdner’s view on the adequacy of the conclusion the point is that he considers the two Ghazalian views as incompatible, and shortly after that he refers to this as an “incorrigible inconsistency”.

The quotation just cited has given W. M. Watt the clue to challenge the authenticity of a whole section of the above mentioned book, since the doctrine of the difference of God takes on a Neoplatonic flavor that contradicts the rest of the *Mishkāt*, parts of which discuss the hidden similarity between man and God.<sup>2</sup>

These writers have noted the inconsistency but the nature of the task each has chosen for himself in the works mentioned did not

<sup>1</sup> *Mish.*, pp. 28-29; italics for “modify or even negate” are mine; “last” is italicized in the original.

<sup>2</sup> *J.R.A.S.*, 1949, “A Forgery in Al-Ghazali’s *Mishkāt*”, p. 5. I am not concerned here with whether that part of Ghazali’s book is or is not Neoplatonic, but merely with the fact that the *inconsistency* between the emphasis on God as attributeless and the emphasis on similarity between God and man is being singled out.

We might add that if our thesis of the compatibility of the comparable-incomparable Ghazalian view of God is correct, and to the extent that Watt’s rejection of the authenticity of the Veils-Section is based on the supposed incompatibility of these two aspects of God, then Watt’s argument is weakened. For the claim of the authenticity of the Veils-Section along with the rest of the *Mishkāt*, see Jabre, *Op. Cit.*, p. 200n.

seem to allow them to treat the inconsistency as a philosophic problem. Another writer, Kenneth Cragg, is more keenly aware of the philosophic problem at issue and notes it in terms of the problem of meaning and the epistemology of attribution, but again due to the nature of his chosen task he merely notes the problem then very briefly offers a suggestion as to what he thinks is the only solution to it.

“The problem of meaning in language exists for all religions and is not unique to Islam.<sup>1</sup> It can only be solved within the conviction that the Divine and the human are truly meaningful to each other: only in the confidence that the relationships God has with man are really indicative of His Nature. We only put these convictions more shortly—and sublimely—when we say: “God is Love”. Islam has never felt able to say that. The pressure of these problems is the measure of its reluctance.”<sup>2</sup>

It is not clear whether the author here is offering the principles for a solution or merely indicating the area within which such principles can be found. If “within the conviction” means that having the specific conviction he mentions one has a necessary start for solving the problem but that the conviction itself does not solve it, then this is possible, but it is not clear to the reader what those principles might be. However, if Mr. Cragg means that the conviction (that such and such) would solve the problem, as is suggested by the second phrase, “in the confidence”, then one cannot help questioning how a philosophic problem can be solved within a conviction and a confidence. The conviction and the confidence may assure the believer that God does reveal His real nature to man instead of remaining transcendent and merely “causing to descend” an inadequate human-language version of His nature. But the conviction and the confidence that God *does* truly reveal Himself do not answer in the least the philosophic question of *how* this is possible.

A fuller and perhaps a more challenging discussion of this problem—also as a problem for Islam in general but with the explicit inclusion of Ghazali—comes from the noted Islamist, D. B. Macdonald, in an article in the Hartford Seminary Record,<sup>3</sup> and we shall devote more space for a discussion of his position.

<sup>1</sup> The writer is talking about Islam in general, and we take it this applies to Ghazali.

<sup>2</sup> Cragg, *The Call of the Minaret*, pp. 55-56.

<sup>3</sup> Volume XX, 1910: “One Phase of the Doctrine of the Unity of God With Some Consequences.”

## B. MACDONALD'S POSITION

*Preliminary*

Macdonald traces the contradiction between the two Islamic views of the divine nature back to the Prophet Muhammad. He speaks of the Prophet as having had a

"bundle of contradictory ideas... His Allah, on one hand, was an awful unity, throned apart from all creation, creating, ruling, destroying all. But on another hand, he is depicted in the most frankly anthropomorphic terms both of body and of mind; and on yet another, phrases are used of him which, fairly interpreted, can mean nothing else than immanence."<sup>1</sup>

Macdonald remarks understandingly that:

"Muhammad was no systematizer; certainly he had no coherent system of theology."<sup>2</sup>

He then discusses how the Muslim orthodox theologians concentrated on and developed the idea of God as an "awful unity". The result of their theologizing is described by Macdonald in the following terms.

"Allah is so separate from his creatures, is so incomprehensible, has so little touch of kinship with them, is not their father, has not borne their flesh and known their sorrows, has not tabernacled with them, has not been revealed to them by his Word made flesh; has not been to them an indwelling Holy Ghost,<sup>3</sup> is so absolutely separated from all sympathy with them by his remote, unkindred nature—verily a God afar off!"<sup>4</sup>

*Some Clarifications*

The words "separate from", "remote", and "afar off" ("transcendent" is a usual equivalent to these) which occur in the above quotation may all be understood in four senses when they apply to God. There is no evidence in Macdonald's article of an awareness of the different senses, certainly not of the implications of the different senses for his position in the article.

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>3</sup> It might be explained that the article under discussion was delivered "as the annual address at the opening of the Hartford Theological Seminary". *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

1. In one sense God may be called separate from (or transcendent) in that He is *not identical* with either the world as a totality or with any particular thing in the world. As against this position it may be held that God and the world—in its totality and as a unit—are identical. This is pantheism. Or, one may hold that God while separate from the world as a totality is (or was) nonetheless identical with one historical figure which appeared in the world: Jesus Christ. This is Christian theistic incarnation.

2. In another sense God may be transcendent or remote, in the sense of being *utterly different* from any other thing. The issue here is not one relating to numerical distinctness—regardless of similarity—but to whether there is any similarity or none at all. The doctrine that God is utterly different is known in Islam as *mukbālafab*. It is mentioned in the quotation from Gairdner at the beginning of this chapter, and is referred to in the last Macdonald quotation by the phrase "unkindred nature". The opposite of *mukbālafab* is *tashbīh* (or anthropomorphism) which has various degrees of crudity (or various degrees of subtlety). Thus "remote" or "transcendent" here, referring to God's nature, means "*unlike*". A result of this, of course is that God is "incomprehensible", to use Macdonald's word.

3. In a third sense remoteness or separateness may be applied to God's *agency* in its relation to the world. The issue here is whether God intervenes in the world and especially in the affairs of man, or remains separate and aloof. A theist believes that God does intervene, a deist believes that He does not.

4. Finally, assuming God does intervene, and viewing God's nature from the point of view of man's devotional need and response, God may be called remote if He is depicted in terms that do not inspire the kind of trust, love, and fellowship which Christians, including Macdonald, make so much of when they talk about their religion.<sup>1</sup> This sense of the remoteness of God is clearly implied in the last Macdonald quotation by the list of all that the Christian God

<sup>1</sup> There is a tendency among some Christian writers on Islam, especially earlier and missionary-minded ones, to overplay the 'harsh' features of the Muslim God—as some have done with Judaism—some often overlooking or soft-pedaling the 'softer' features. This remark is being made out of a motive for accuracy not as a response to what some Christians regard as axiomatic, that the 'softer' God is *better*, and therefore I could here be hastening apologetically to recall that the Muslim God has some soft features *too!*

does but the Muslim God does not do. It is also apparent in the use of the phrase "so absolutely separated from all *sympathy* with them".<sup>1</sup> God may be described here as 'inscrutable,<sup>2</sup> stern, aloof,' in contrast with a God who is *close*, i.e. 'loving, warm and friendly'.

Ghazali's God, and that of Muslim orthodox theologians, is separate in the first sense, i.e. not identical, without any exception for Christ or anyone else. He is remote in the second sense, utterly different in nature, yet He is also spoken of in terms that imply likeness to man. However, for Ghazali such human-term characterization of God gives no indication of God's nature. God remains utterly different. Furthermore, God is not remote in the third sense, for He does intervene, although the relational attribute-words which designate such intervention cannot have their ordinary meaning. God remains unknowable with respect to all His attributes relational or otherwise. Finally, as far as the fourth sense of remote and its opposite, Ghazali speaks of God in terms that elicit both fear and comfort.<sup>3</sup>

One can see that despite the counterbalancing emphases, a picture of God emerges which is remote, separate, or transcendent in the first and second senses, and to some extent in the fourth sense; God is distinct from the world, different from it, and has a "stern Will". According to the third sense God intervenes in the world, thus He is not remote or aloof. His Will in the world is pervading, but according to the fourth sense that Will is also "inscrutable".

<sup>1</sup> My italics. In an almost Nietzschean phrase Ghazali speaks of the masculinity or toughness (*fuḥūlah*) of *tanẓīh* (God above characterization) and the femininity (*'unūṭhab*) of *tashbīh* (anthropomorphism) *Ih.* IV, 5, *shaṭr* 1, 2nd *bayān*, p. 216.

<sup>2</sup> In Macdonald's words, "You can never tell when this absolute Allah, unconditioned and unhampered within and without, may not reassert itself." (*Op. cit.*, p. 33).

<sup>3</sup> Otto in the *Idea of the Holy*, (Oxford University Press), makes two important distinctions that correspond to two of the distinctions used in this essay. First, he distinguishes between the rational and the non-rational elements in religion. To this corresponds our distinction between God as beyond human conception and attribution and God as conceptualized in terms of attributes drawn from the world of man. (For the difference between Otto's and Ghazali's position see note 1, p. 15). Second, Otto distinguishes in the numinous between the element of the *mysterium tremendum* and the element of fascination. "The *tremendum*, the daunting and repelling moment of the numinous is schematized by means of the rational ideas of justice, moral will,...it becomes the holy 'wrath of God' ...The *fascinans*, the attracting and alluring moment of the numinous is schematized by means of the ideas of goodness, mercy, love..." (p. 140). This corresponds roughly to our distinction between the fourth meaning of remote and its opposite, only without the idea of schematization i.e. of giving rational concepts to the non-rational.

This in more precise terms is one of Macdonald's points in the article under discussion. We have already remarked on the effects of a transcendent God, in the sense of utterly different and unknowable, on devotional response.<sup>1</sup>

#### *Macdonald's Contention*

But Macdonald proceeds to offer an important thought, and it is this that we wish to contest, making use of the clarifications just given on the senses of "separate" and "remote".

Macdonald says,

"And when the thunder of the hoofs of these warriors for the greater glory of God<sup>2</sup> has echoed past, what is left? What was left for the Muslims? What is left for us? As I see it, only two possibilities. Either such a conception as the Christian Trinity, *which breaks the awful impassibility of the logically unified absolute which renders possible sympathy, affection, love, trust; which makes God knowable*—that is how the Son reveals the Father to us; which makes us the Sons of God, partakers of the divine nature, and not simply the creatures of his hand; which finds within the Christian Church the Holy Ghost, the Comforter, the Lord and Giver of life; and which yet preserves God—Father, Son and Holy Ghost—as a conscious, knowing, feeling, willing individual. Either that or Pantheism, in which the many vanishes in the one, and the one vanishes in the many."<sup>3</sup>

The problem according to Macdonald is how to "break the awful impassibility of the logically unified absolute" so that God becomes characterizable "as a conscious, knowing, feeling, willing individual" and thus become "knowable" (in other words to become the opposite of remote in the second sense, or somehow like man). And therefore also to render possible "sympathy, affection, love, trust" i.e. warm and friendly, or the opposite of remote in the fourth sense. As a solution Macdonald believes that a concept like that of the Christian Trinity pre-eminently serves the purpose. Macdonald seems to believe also that pantheism can break the awful impassibility of the logically

<sup>1</sup> Chapter Two, p. 23, and note 1 on that page. It must be said that Macdonald is talking about the orthodox *theologians'* God. As a versed Islamist he shows great awareness that the ordinary believers and the mystics have not accepted the theologians' formulations for their day to day religious needs.

<sup>2</sup> We shall see in Chapters Six and Seven the importance to our essay of the theologian's concern for the greater glory of God.

<sup>3</sup> Macdonald, *op. cit.*, p. 29; my italics.

unified absolute. Although he does not elaborate as to what the pantheistic bridge connects, it is reasonable to assume that pantheism, according to Macdonald, is supposed to bridge the gap between the logically unified God who is beyond characterization and not worshipable (i.e. the infinite) and the finite world of man. This point will be taken up shortly.

There is therefore a *gap* between the logically unified God, non-characterizable and unworshipable, and the God who may be characterized and worshiped.<sup>1</sup> Both pantheism and the concept of the Trinity are supposed to provide a 'link' which bridges the gap between the infinite unknowable and the finite knowable. By offering these two solutions, both metaphysical, and saying that only these are solutions, Macdonald implies that without this metaphysical link the problem cannot be solved. Orthodox Muslim theologians including Ghazali are neither Christian Trinitarians nor are they pantheists and are therefore, supposedly, unable to solve the problem. Ghazali, in effect, merely says that the utterly unique unknowable God has a knowable aspect, or stated theistically, God has revealed Himself to man in language that man can understand.

Before we pursue Macdonald's main thesis further, there are two remarks in his article that call for comment. The first remark is tangentially related to our present discussion, the second is more to its substance.

We have just said that orthodox Muslim theologians including Ghazali are not pantheists. Yet Macdonald, after his Christian Trinity or pantheism suggestion proceeds surprisingly to say:

"Islam wittingly and unwittingly, chose Pantheism. All thinking religious Muslims are mystics. *All, too, are Pantheists, but some do not know it.*"<sup>2</sup>

If Macdonald's claim that all thinking religious Muslims are pantheists is made on the basis of an implied identification between mystical union and pantheistic oneness, then he has misunderstood

<sup>1</sup> Although Macdonald speaks here of the One or the "logically unified absolute" and our problem concerns the unique God who is above characterization, for all intents and purposes the two conceptions are the same. As we remarked earlier, (p. 21; see also pp. 97-98) God as one and God as unique intersect at the point where one of the meanings of saying that God is *one* is that He is alone in what He is. To exclusively claim an essence is to be alone, or numerically one (of its kind).

<sup>2</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 36; my italics.

mystical utterances about the climactic experience, at least from Ghazali's standpoint. If on the other hand, Macdonald's claim is based on the conception of the "logically unified absolute", which is "unified within and without" so that there is only God, then again, at least in the case of Ghazali, this doctrine is not pantheistic. We have already indicated what Ghazali means by the statement 'God is the only existent', or, that the many are also one. It is a unity due to God's pervading agency *not a unity of essence*. The word "pantheism" applies to the belief that "God" and "the world" name the same thing. Some relations between God and the world or God and the mystic may be portrayed as 'close enough' so that pantheistic identification is suggested, but to call these pantheism without qualification would be imprecise.

In his article "Allah"<sup>1</sup> Macdonald is more cautious and more accurate. He says:

"It was the work of Ghazali to construct a mystical system in which this pantheistic element (the view that Allah is the One Existent) was restrained if not destroyed."<sup>2</sup>

At least Ghazali seems to be excluded from pantheism here.

The other Macdonald comment comes as a continuation of the quotation before the last one. He says:

"Al-Ghazzali, from the time of his conversion, labored to harmonize a religious attitude which was purely Pantheistic with a religious system of the severest Unitarianism. Later Islam has followed his norm, and walked in his path. But inasmuch as his system held in it *so essential a contradiction*, divergencies to one side or the other have been very numerous."<sup>3</sup>

The contradiction noted here is the familiar one. The pantheistic attitude supposedly is mysticism which 'unites' man and God. The unitarianism emphasizing the one incomprehensible God, 'separates' man and God.

In the two-solutions quotation<sup>4</sup> pantheism is classified as a solution. It bridges the gap between the infinite and the finite. But in the passage just quoted, it appears as a party to the dispute, opposed by the strict unitarianism. A possible explanation is that Macdonald uses

<sup>1</sup> *E. I.*, Vol. I, p. 302.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 309.

<sup>3</sup> Hartford Seminary Record, Vol. XX, p. 36; my italics.

<sup>4</sup> p. 83, above.

the word "pantheism" ambiguously: a) as standing for man's *religious union* with God, and b) as referring to the *metaphysical identity* of God and the world (including man). In the first sense pantheism is a party to the dispute. It 'unifies' man and God, while the strict unitarianism 'separates' them. The two positions seem incompatible. This essay seeks to show that in Ghazali's case, at least, the "essential contradiction" is unreal. In the second sense, pantheism is the gap-bridger between the infinite and the finite. We shall see that pantheism is no solution at all. From Macdonald's remark about "so essential a contradiction" it may be that he too does not believe that pantheism, in the second sense, can solve the problem. We shall show that the Christian doctrine of the Trinity cannot either, and for the same reason.

Let us now resume our main discussion.

#### *Further Clarification*

In order to understand Macdonald's contention better and in order to prepare for its criticism let us restate his position more systematically, point by point.

1. It may be said that Macdonald is seriously concerned with whether a God can lend Himself to the peculiarly Christian devotional virtues: affection, love, trust, comfort, etc. (*close* in the fourth sense). Two pictures of God make this psychologically impossible. First, a God who is above likeness or characterization. Second, a God whose Will is inscrutable, who is severe, expects mere obedience, and instills fear in man. In other words, God is not worshipable with longing and warmth if God is remote in the second and fourth senses. On the other hand, God is supremely worshipable in the way indicated if He can somehow be characterized in human terms, and of these, such characterization as inspires love, affection and trust. In other words, if God is the *opposite of remote* (or is *close*) in the second and fourth senses.

2. Such being Macdonald's concern, he finds himself faced with the Muslim theologians' God who is remote in the second and fourth senses. The question arises: *Can* orthodox Islam speak of God as close, in the sense of characterizable so as to elicit warm worship (opposite of sense four)? The "can" refers to logical possibility. Ghazali *has* spoken of God in human terms and *has* depicted God so as to make Him the object of longing for intimate devotion and affection. The question, which is one of the problems of our essay, is

whether there is any logical incompatibility between the notion of God as beyond characterization and the one in which God is characterized.

3. But as a problem of logical incompatibility, the problem should be stated in terms of the second sense of remote and its opposite. The incompatibility is between being above characterization and *any* characterization. If there is any incompatibility then it is present *whether the characterization of God is in warm and friendly, or cold and aloof, or neutral terms.*

4. In thinking of a solution for this incompatibility Macdonald notices one difference between orthodox Islam, on the one hand, and Christianity and pantheism on the other. Recalling the first sense of God's separateness from the world, it is apparent that Ghazali and Muslim theologians like him clearly maintain that God is not nor can be identical with anything. He cannot share His essence with either the world as a totality or with any particular person in it. Pantheism and Christianity on the other hand do offer the identifications mentioned, respectively.

Macdonald's contention then boils down to this. Unless the infinite is *metaphysically identical* with the finite in some way then it is *logically impossible* for God (or the Infinite) to be close, in both the sense of being characterizable, and being characterizable specifically as warm and friendly. Or, this contention may be summarized in three separate sentences. 1. There is an inconsistency in holding the attributeless-attributable (or unknowable-knowable) view of the Divine Nature. 2. The solution must be metaphysical. 3. The concept of the Trinity or pantheism can solve the problem. In the following section of this chapter we shall challenge Macdonald on the last two points, and challenge the first point in Chapter Seven.

#### C. REFUTATION OF MACDONALD'S POSITION

We can perhaps start by uncovering what is underneath the problematic character in the metaphysical relation between God and the World. Let us first note what both pantheism and the concept of the Trinity have in common as 'solutions'.

In pantheism, the metaphorical statement "the many vanishes in the one and the one vanishes in the many" expresses that tenet in the doc-

trine according to which the Infinite One and the finite many somehow share one essence. They are ultimately one. The *gap* between the infinite and the finite is supposed to be *bridged* at the level at which all share one essence. There is ultimately one kind of stuff not two. In a similar way the concept of the Trinity is said to *bridge the gap*, since Christ is in fact both in one. Like the One in pantheism, Christ is the point of merging of the two *kinds of stuff*.

Certain words have been italicized because I wish to point out that knowingly or unknowingly a physical analogy is at the basis of the problematic character of the question. More forcefully, the problem is created by the way in which the relation between God and the world is seen, and this is seen in terms of a physical analogy. Of course God is a supra-empirical being and the question is considered a metaphysical one, but there is still an underlying physical analogy.

One thinks of two physical substances which are relatable in many ways but are so very different one from the other, that one asks the *chemically* inspired question: How can one kind of stuff become transformed into the other when they are so different? The transformation here is a process, a series of events, which can be described by a set of factual statements the words for which are used in their standard or literal designation. In an analogous manner God and the world are regarded as two *entities* only very different ones. These two very different entities are relatable, in fact one of them, God, takes on the mode of existence of the other. But how can this *happen* (speaking of it as an *event*)? How can one thing, like God, be or become something so very different like the world? How can justice become a piece of wood? And for Ghazali's thought the question becomes, how can God as utterly unique and unknowable take on an aspect, the knowable aspect, which is made up of bricks taken from that other kind of thing, the world, from which God is so different. What we need is a "link" that "bridges the gap", perhaps a piece of wooden justice!

In criticism one notes first of all what may be called a theological "category mistake". The things in this world are entities, and entities of a kind about which certain behavioural expectations are justified. They change into other things, this change is an event, describable in falsifiable literal language. But when God is declared utterly unique it cannot be intended that He is *another thing* only very different. When Ghazali says that God is above relations this should mean, like our interpretation of being above causability, that He is not the

*sort of 'thing'* that can enter into relations. Devotionally, however, God is an entity, a being, a personal being who is related to the world in all sorts of ways, but if one is to take God's utter uniqueness and unknowability seriously, then such devotional language cannot be descriptive, it cannot be reportive of events in the world (or 'outside' it). It must be of the nature of mythologizing rather than describing. God neither can nor cannot take on human form. Unless our language is mythology it would not make sense to say that he can or cannot. He is not the sort of 'thing' to be able or not. Justice cannot become a piece of wood not for lack of ability on its part. Rather, it is not the sort of 'thing' of which one says it can become or is unable to become a piece of wood. And this is not like toothpaste which cannot become gold. The latter is an empirical impossibility, the former is a confusion of logical types on the part of the speaker.

The question: How can an unknowable God have a knowable aspect is not a metaphysical question, but a logical one and an epistemological one. It is logical in two senses. First, in the ordinary sense that it concerns the logical incompatibility of two statements: 'God is unknowable' and 'God is knowable'. Second, logical or linguistic in the contemporary and special sense, in that the question is one the solution of which depends on recognizing that the two statements in the final analysis belong to different logical types. The question may also be called epistemological since we are concerned with the basis on which the statements are made. Such a basis varies with the logical type.

#### *Pantheism and the Trinity Do Not Solve*

Even if we overlook the above remarks that deny the need for a metaphysical solution, and accept the assumptions that God is an entity that relates itself to the world and takes on a mode of finite existence, it is still questionable whether the suggested solutions do solve the problem. How can one wonder whether the infinite can become finite and be satisfied in the belief that an intermediary which is both can bridge the gap? Is not the same problem which existed in the relation of the opposing poles now pushed to the mediating link? If we are told it is a mystery how a mediator can be both infinite and finite then why is one satisfied with this being a mystery and not with the 'equally mysterious' one of the infinite becoming finite without mediation? Suppose the Muslim, or Ghazali in particular, were to say, the unique and unknowable God revealed

Himself to man in language that man can understand, and this is a mystery. Why should it be more logically unacceptable if God presented to man a knowable version of Himself in words without flesh? It is not being argued here that Ghazali's formula, which we shall examine shortly, is necessarily more adequate than the Christian one, we are merely saying that from the point of view of resolving the inconsistency it is sheer delusion to claim that the concept of the Trinity can do the trick.<sup>1</sup>

The same criticism applies to the suggestion that pantheism might be considered a solution. The belief that somehow all things share one essence because all is God, and therefore this community at some point reduces the gap between the infinite and the finite—this only switches the locus of the inconsistency but does not resolve it. Attempts to bridge the 'gap' by introducing gradations of diminishing infinity beg the issue in the same way. The difference between the infinite and the finite is not one of degree and the problem therefore arises even at the first descent from the infinite.

We conclude, therefore, first, that a metaphysical solution is not necessary. Whether the problem can be solved or not depends not on whether the two different entities involved can metaphysically merge into a fraternal entangle but on what analysis can show about the character of each of the statements constituting the seeming contradiction. The best defense of this contention comes in the analysis itself. Second, that the possible solutions suggested by Macdonald merely beg the issue. The problem is relocated in each case; it is not solved.

#### D. GHAZALI'S ALTERNATIVE POSITION

God is utterly unique it is true, and for this reason utterly unknowable—not in Himself but to man. Yet God reveals Himself to man, through angels, to prophets and thus to the rest of mankind.

"God's Mercy (or Compassion, *ar-rahmah*) has set forth through prophecy to the rest of mankind the measure which their understanding could bear."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See Note 2, p. 123, below.

<sup>2</sup> *Maq.*, last paragraph of the book. See also *Ih* I, 8, *bāb* 3, p. 252. ("We cannot aspire to talk about God in...divine language, but He can stoop, if He chooses, to talk to us in our language..." A. Farrar, "A Theologian's Point of View", *Socratic* No. 5, Student Christian Movement Press, p. 35.)

For Ghazali, then, revelation is the 'link' that 'bridges the gap' between the unknowable and the knowable. But this view has difficulties of its own.

1. It might be religiously satisfying for man to have a picture of the object of his adoration in words that he can understand, but what is the epistemic status of such attribute-words if we know that God is ultimately unknowable? Would they not have to be inadequate? It is no use saying that man is limited and that this is the best that could happen under such limitations, for man is still faced with the fact that there is a discrepancy between what God reveals of Himself and what He is in Himself. What guarantee does man have that such a revealed picture is in the least adequate and what criterion of adequacy can be had if we maintain that God is utterly unknowable? Ghazali in his strictly orthodox moods could answer simply by saying: God has given us this picture of Himself. He has used such and such attribute-words of Himself. They must be applicable to Him in some sense if other than their ordinary sense. How this is so we do not know. We must accept on faith and not ask questions. This answer may have its religious merits, but philosophically it is the equivalent of dropping the matter instead of tackling it.

2. Furthermore, how can (in the sense of logical possibility) a unique unknowable God reveal or communicate? The question is whether the notion of revelation is not logically incompatible with the notion of God as unique and unknowable. And it is in two ways. First, to say God reveals implies some positive knowledge about God the unknowable, for it is a positive assertion. From it we know that God reveals and communicates and this is to know something significant about Him. Second, the unknowable is incommunicable, and if we say God communicated or revealed Himself then we are saying that the incommunicable communicated Himself or is communicable.

We hope to be able to answer these questions in what follows. We must now, however, pick up the threads of our discussion of the major inconsistencies that together constitute the problems of this essay.

## CHAPTER SIX

## LIMITING AND TRANSCENDING THE LIMIT

## A. SUMMARY AND PREVIEW

One of the main questions we have raised in this essay is the question of the logical possibility of saying that man knows a unique unknowable God. We sought entry to a discussion of this and the other main problems by discussing how any religious relation is possible with such a God. We concentrated on the mystical relation which we called a supreme test-case. The mystical goal was found to be in part reducible to, or otherwise presupposed a cognitive relation. As a matter of fact, a knowledge of what God is, is presupposed in any religious relation if that relation is not itself cognitive.

Furthermore, our study of the possibility of confrontation between man and God, and our analysis of the nature of the knowable aspect, led us to conclude that insofar as one can speak of knowing God, such knowledge is always a knowledge that such and such attributes may be used of God. As was already observed in passing and as will be clear in due course, the 'knowledge' of God, unlike the knowledge of other objects, is a knowledge that such and such attributes have been or may be *given to* God. It is not a case of noticing attributes already there. Thus the problem of knowing an unknowable God<sup>1</sup> presupposes the problem of attribution: How can anything be said about a unique unknowable God? To solve the former we have to solve the latter.

The solutions to the former which we have thus far considered have both proved unsatisfactory. Ghazali's explicitly stated solution, that God's Essence is unknowable but His Attributes knowable (in human terms) still left us with the problem of how God can be said to have a knowable and an unknowable aspect. We also considered and rejected the possibility that this was a metaphysical problem needing a metaphysical solution. Macdonald's suggested solutions besides misconstruing the problem as metaphysical merely begged the question.

<sup>1</sup> And this is true of the twin problem of comparing an incomparable God.

How is it logically possible to make attribute-statements about a unique unknowable God? Or even more broadly, how is it possible to say anything whatsoever about such a God including the very statement 'God is utterly unique' and 'God is utterly unknowable'? We shall have to discuss the logical possibility of making the positive attribute-statements such as 'God is merciful, powerful...' etc., as well as the logical possibility of negative predicate-statements on God's uniqueness and unknowability. And a discussion of this kind will have to be preceded by an analysis of the nature of the statements at issue. We may crystalize the task before us in terms of the following two sets of questions:

1. What is the nature of the statements 'God is unique', 'God is unknowable'? On what grounds are they asserted? Is there any self-contradiction in making either of them?

2. If God is unique and unknowable how can anything positive be said of Him at all? What is the nature of such positive assertions? On what grounds is any positive statement made? Is there any contradiction between making the positive assertions and maintaining that God is unique and unknowable?

In attempting to answer these questions we shall first seek Ghazalian answers to them. Contemporary as some of these questions are in their historical background and in their spirit, Ghazali would neither have felt surprised nor ill at ease at receiving them. But since Ghazali did not ask them and worry about them the way we do, one cannot always find complete or satisfactory answers for them in his writings. Thus while our main purpose is to try to reconstruct Ghazalian answers to them we shall not be bound by his limitations. It is hoped that what is Ghazalian and what is not will be clear to the reader.

In the rest of this chapter we shall be concerned with the questions relating to the negative predicate-statements (on incomparability and unknowability), leaving the discussion of the nature and possibility of positive attribution to our next chapter.

## B. THE PROBLEM STATED

What is self-refuting in saying either that God is utterly unique, or God is utterly unknowable?

Supposedly it is this. To say of any X (God in this case) that it is utterly unlike anything is to make a comparative statement in which



X is one of the terms in the comparison. A comparative statement implies that both terms in the comparison are known (and therefore knowable). For it must be on the basis of a knowledge of what God is that we can say He is unlike the rest of things. Now, to know even the least bit about a thing implies that it must to some extent be like other things, for in knowledge there is always recognition, classification. Thus our X, God, is to some extent like other things and is not *utterly* unique.

Nor is God *utterly* unknowable. We have seen this to be true in the above argument, but the same conclusion may be reached by examining the implications of the other statement, 'God is utterly unknowable'. To make this statement one must know something, one must have some idea of what that thing one calls "utterly unknowable" is. Now this is not like the case of being asked: Do you know what a *vzik-plif* is? If one were shown a squash and asked, is this a *vzik-plif*? then a fountain pen, and the question repeated and so on, one would keep on saying: I don't know, I have no idea what you mean by the word "*vzik-plif*". But in the case of the word "God", even the agnostic would emphatically deny that it applies to squash and fountain pens. One must, therefore, have some indication as to the meaning of the word "God" and thus have some idea of what this utterly unknowable God is. But then God is *not utterly* unknowable.

So might run the arguments for the contention that each of the statements under consideration is self-refuting.

### C. ON UNIQUENESS

#### *Assumption in the Argument*

One crucial assumption made in the uniqueness argument which we wish to discuss may be best brought out by means of an analogy. There is a social game in which someone leaves the room and the rest of the group selects some object. Then the exile returns and asks questions about the mysterious object. Those who answer know what the object—let us say a lamp—is, and on this basis they can answer "no it is not..." or "does not have...", namely, it is *unlike* the X's and Y's that the questioner brings up in order to find out by a set of closing circles of explicit or implicit similarity what the object is.

In this example, those who answer one thing or another know what the lamp is like, what it can or cannot do. All statements of the form 'X is unlike this or that' *have been arrived at* by knowing, empirically, all or many of the characteristics of X. Also, the statement 'X is not this, not that' has meaning and is *found to be true* in terms of the already known (or knowable) statements: 'X is like this, like that'. Because of this it would be self-contradictory to pronounce the lamp unlike X, Y, and Z without implying some knowledge, actually known (or knowable), of what a lamp is like.

#### *The Type of Statement*

This is the assumption: that both terms in the comparison should be known. Our quarrel with this assumption is not that it is ordinarily false. Our quarrel, rather, is that it does not apply in the case of the statement made about God, and therefore the whole argument on the self-refuting character of the uniqueness of God statement falls down.

Is the statement 'God is utterly unlike other things' of the same type as the statement 'The lamp is unlike X, Y, and Z'? Let us answer this by first summarizing the characteristics that make the latter statement the type that it is.

- a. It is an assertion.
- b. That something is (or is not) the case about an entity.
- c. It is the kind of statement that can be either true or false.
- d. It is shown to be true or false by testing in experience.
- e. All the words used are used in their standard designation, i.e. the language is literal or descriptive.
- f. The point of the statement is (usually) to convey information.

These are the conditions which make it logically necessary for the comparative statement 'the lamp is unlike X, Y, and Z' to imply that one knows something about the lamp. Should one utter the statement and at the same time assert that the speaker knows nothing about the lamp nor about what a lamp is (and not be lying, or be making the statement irresponsibly or jokingly), then this would be a self-contradiction. Is the statement 'God is utterly unique (unlike anything)' of the same type as the one fulfilling the above conditions?

#### *God's Uniqueness Honorific*

There are strong indications in Ghazali's writings that the state-

ment 'God is utterly unique', like the statement 'God is utterly unknowable', is honorific or laudatory. Here is a sample quotation. Note the tone of the language just as much as the ordinary meaning of the words used.

"God is above all the attributes of His creation. He is indescribable, loftier than to be described and loftier than to be characterized as 'loftier', more exalted and above being called 'more exalted', greater than to be called 'greater'. Should God become the subject of discourse then withhold yourself and say, 'I do not count praises unto Thee as Thou hast praised Thyself'. He is above all the descriptions of describers. Unto Thee is the loftiest loftiness ... and the most glorious majesty... All attribution has missed the mark and all adjectives are beneath Thy holiness. Thy greatness has perplexed all imagination."<sup>1</sup>

It is as if it were insulting to God to think of Him in terms of metaphysically dependent, changing, finite being, or even more so in terms of imperfect humanity, or merely in terms of the familiar. Far be it from God to be like any of this. Given this interpretation the statement need not have any of the characteristics 'a' through 'f' just mentioned. For it could be taken as the equivalent of the declaration 'No earthly reference is *worthy* of Thee', which like the utterance 'Glory be to God' cannot significantly be contradicted. Nor is it the kind of utterance that necessarily implies such-is-the-case-about X sort of statements. From them one does not learn anything about God.

However, it is perfectly possible for an utterance to praise and assert that something is the case at the same time i.e. to be laudatory but not purely laudatory. For example, one may say: "He was the *only* one who stood up for the lady". Depending on the circumstances and the way of intoning the utterance, it could be an expression of praise. But it is not merely so. It is not the equivalent of 'Bravo!'; for one clearly learns that (a) he stood up for the lady and (b) no one else did. One learns what is the case about the man's behavior. Therefore, the determination that the statement 'God is utterly unique' is laudatory does not preclude the possibility that it might also be some kind of meaningful assertion about God which would make it possible for that statement to be self-refuting.

#### *Negative A Priori*

However, the statement 'God is utterly unique' has two characteristics that are crucial and that, along with other considerations, will lead us to say that it is not self-refuting.

<sup>1</sup> *Ma.*, p. 197.

First, the God-statement may well be classified as an assertion that something is (not) the case about God, and it is reasonable to suppose that Ghazali intended it as such. But what does it say or imply about God? It simply says that God is not like anything we know or will know. Nothing positive is asserted or implied about God. The statement, in other words, is a pure negation and does not either explicitly or implicitly tell us anything positive about God.

Second, unlike the statement about the lamp the statement about God is not arrived at experientially and comparatively. For no experience can yield the belief that God is unique, nor can any experience prove the statement to be true or false. In other words, the statement is made on some basis entirely independent of experience, comparative or otherwise, and is acceptable or rejectable on a basis equally independent of experience.

The bases on which the statement is made may be called logical and religious, but the ultimate basis is the religious.

The logical consideration is the following. It is a fundamental article of Muslim Faith that there is no god but Allah. An obvious meaning of this is that, numerically, there is only one 'thing' that the words "god" and "Allah" denote, and that they both have the same denotation. This is a denial of polytheism. But this article of Faith is not a census report. It is not like saying there is only one man in the room. To say there is only one God is also to affirm that there *can be* only one God, meaning there can be only one *godly nature*. To believe that there is or can be an other like Him is the highest religious infidelity in Islam. It is *shirk*, or ascribing partners to God. And as we saw in Chapter One to be unique in being godly or divine implies being different in every respect from other things.

We can say, then, the statement 'God is unique' is analytically implied by the statement 'There is one god, Allah', in so far as the latter can be taken to mean 'There can only be one god or one godly nature'. It must be emphasized that the assertion of the uniqueness of something does not follow from the mere report of numerical aloneness. From the assertion 'There is one man in the room' it certainly does not follow that the man is unlike anything else in the room. What is different in the case of God is that there are two assumed premises. a) There is or can be only one divine nature. b) To be divine is to differ in every respect from other things (non-divine things). How the assumption of the former premise is justified has just been shown by explicating the assertion that there is one God.

It is part of the meaning of the assertion of oneness. That the inclusion of the other premise is justified has been shown in Chapter One in the analysis of the notion of uniqueness when applied to the divine, which analysis we said finds support in Ghazalian text. There again the utter difference follows from the meaning of divine. Or to recall Ghazali's words, the divine has certain "...attributes and other prerogatives proper to it *qua divine* which distinguish it from other things".<sup>1</sup>

The other basis for the statement under consideration has already been discussed—namely, the religious motivation for praise which leads Ghazali to deny that God can be like any of the finite things we know.

Therefore, given the belief that there is no god but Allah and the fact that this logically implies that God is unique, then, given a religious motivation to praise God and the fact that to declare God utterly unique is to praise supremely, then these are sufficient bases for saying that God is utterly unique. Neither these bases, nor the character of the statement as non-experiential pure negation imply that God is in any positive way knowable or comparable. Thus the statement as analyzed is not self-refuting.

We turn now to the consideration of the other statement: 'God is utterly unknowable'.

#### D. ON UNKNOWABILITY

As we remarked in Chapter Three<sup>2</sup> there are two reasons<sup>3</sup> for Ghazali's utter agnosticism as to God's nature—reasons similar to the ones which account for his insistence on God's utter uniqueness. First, if God is utterly unique then it follows that He is utterly unknowable. Second, Ghazali wishes to praise God by placing Him beyond the ken of man. Then, in our discussion of the uniqueness statement we noted that the fact that the statement expresses praise does not rule out classifying it as an assertion, albeit a negative one (i.e. that something is *not* the case about God). Now we ask, does the negative assertion that God is utterly unknowable imply that God is knowable?

<sup>1</sup> See p. 21 above.

<sup>2</sup> pp. 47 f.

<sup>3</sup> The perspectival insight discussed in Chapter Four (pp. 60 ff) may be kept in mind. It is more of a remote or background reason.

The argument that such a statement is self-refuting rests on the assumption that at least the person who makes it must have some idea as to the meaning of the word "God" and must therefore know *something* about what God is. But all that Ghazali needs in order to make the statement is to use the word "God" as an index finger to point at the accepted theistic God which is profusely characterized in positive terms. The speaker and the listeners clearly know the subject of discussion. It is the theistic God who is and has done all that the Qur'ān says He is and has done. Now, Ghazali would say all that characterization is merely in human terms and does not apply adequately to God. He is above all that. He is utterly unique. Therefore, this is not a case where the word "God" refers to what is not identifiable in any way whatsoever. Were that the case, one might ask, but what is it that you are calling utterly unknowable? No answer could be given without self-contradiction. In our case the answer is simply: the theistic God whom people worship (as known to them); *that* is unknowable, in that He is above any of the accepted characterizations. It should be recalled that the bases for making this assertion are the logical implication by 'God is utterly unique', and the religious motive for praise. On neither basis can one say that God as unknowable must have been known in order to be declared unknowable. Thus, in the case of Ghazali's assertion, and with the bases that it has, one does not have to know both sides of the limit in order to draw the limit.

Before moving on let us dispose of a trivial case in which to declare God unknowable implies that one knows *something* about God (namely, that He is unknowable).

In a sense any true statement which asserts a predicate about a subject entitles one, if one knows that it is true, to say, "I *know* that such and such is true about X", even if, as in this case, what grammatically appears as the predicate are such words with negative connotation like "unique", "unknowable". In another sense, not *any* predicate in a true statement will do, but only a *positive* one, before any knowledge claim can be made. The statement with the positive predicate (like merciful or just, etc.) must tell us what God is, not what He is not. No such predicates are accepted by Ghazali as applying to God as He is in Himself, but only as man inadequately conceives Him to be. Therefore, 'knowing' that God is unique, unknowable, along with the other negative terms or what is implied

by them (oneness,<sup>1</sup> necessary existence, eternity, etc.) is not learning anything positive about God, and therefore is not the knowledge that would make the statement self-refuting.

#### E. CONCLUSION

We conclude, then, that neither of the statements 'God is utterly unique' and 'God is utterly unknowable' are self-refuting (Problem One), that they are logically implied by the basic Muslim belief that there is no god but Allah, and are intended to express praise. We must now turn to the second possible inconsistency, the more important one: The inconsistency between the two statements that we discussed in this chapter, on the one hand, and all the positive attribute-statements, on the other (Problem Two). We shall also have to discuss the logically prior question of how attribution is possible (Problem Three).

<sup>1</sup> Oneness in the sense of simplicity of essence is a denial of plurality in the divine nature. Numerical oneness—that there is only one God—on the other hand, may be characterized as a denial of polytheism. Of course, it could also be taken as a positive assertion, but to say there is only one of a thing, or, in the case of God, there is only one godly nature, is not to say anything about what the thing or what that nature is. To say it is godly or divine is of no help when the divine is unknowable. Therefore, one may say there is only one thing unknowable, or two or three without any self-contradiction.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### THE PROBLEM OF ATTRIBUTION

"...in one important sense, when we speak about God, we do not know what we mean (that is, we do not know what that which we are talking about is like), and we do not need to know, because we accept the images, which we employ, on authority. Because our concern with God is religious not speculative... because our need is, not to know what God is like, but to enter into relation with him, the authorised images serve our purpose. They belong to a type of discourse—parable—with which we are familiar, and therefore they have communication value, although in a sense they lack descriptive value."

I. M. Crombie, *Socratic* No. 5, p. 22.

#### A. INADEQUACY OF ATTRIBUTION

If God is unique and unknowable then is it not logically impossible to ascribe to Him any attributes? For by making positive statements about what God is we seem to contradict the statement that He is unknowable, and by using in such statements predicates that apply to His creatures we seem to contradict the statement that He is utterly unique.

This in more basic terms is the burden of the criticism made by the writers mentioned at the beginning of our fifth chapter. But what has possibly been missed is the significance of Ghazali's contention that all attribution is inadequate. This should make an important difference in any evaluation of his position.

Ghazali explicitly rejects the possibility that attribute-statements retain their usual meaning when used of God. Although *we understand* God's attributes in our own terms *none of them as such* (i.e. as we understand them) *are true of God*. When Ghazali says that God is unique and unknowable it would certainly be inconsistent for him to say anything which implies that God is *not* unique and unknowable. This would be like saying of an animal, "I know nothing of the colour of its eyes and they are blue in colour". If the statement 'and

they are blue in colour' is meant to be descriptive and true then the inconsistency is "in corrigible". But, by saying that attribute-words do not apply to God as we understand them, Ghazali means that all positive attribute-statements about God *are false* if the words are taken in the way we humans understand them. In other words, statements like 'God is kind (as man is kind)', 'God is powerful (as man is powerful)' etc., are always false since their contradictories, 'God is not kind (as man is kind)' etc., are always true. Therefore, the statements 'God is knowable' and 'God is comparable' are also false, since they are implied by the more specific statements 'God is kind' and 'God is powerful'.

Now it is clearly known in logic that a statement is compatible with the falseness of its opposite. If 'p' is true then 'not-p' is false. There would be a contradiction if both 'p' and 'not-p' were true. In our problem, 'God is utterly unique' and 'God is unknowable' are true. The latter is implied by the former which in turn is implied by the statement 'There is one god, Allah'. And this statement is a basic theistic article of faith. But the statements 'God is comparable' and 'God is knowable' are false. And since their falsity is compatible with the truth of the statements 'God is utterly unique' and 'God is unknowable' we must conclude, therefore, that the contradiction under discussion is unreal.

With this conclusion drawn from explicit Ghazalian principles we have rejected the second of the three assumptions which we said would have to be made if the seeming contradiction is to be a real one—namely that if the contradiction is real both sets of statements forming the contradiction must be true. The first assumption was that the two opposing statements should be the same, or affirm and deny the same thing about the same aspect of some object under consideration. We have already discussed Ghazali's answer to this in Chapter Four. A rejection of the third assumption—that the two statements are of the same type—will be taken up shortly.

If the inconsistency, as thus far demonstrated, is unreal, the important set of related questions that should have concerned Ghazali's (and Islam's) critics are these. *In what sense* is it adequate to say or imply (as one seems to imply by the positive attribute-statements) that God is knowable and comparable, and *on what grounds* can one make the positive attribute-statements which seem to imply that He is knowable and comparable? Finally, given the sense in which attribution is inadequate, *does this imply a criterion of adequacy* which might yet

conflict with the conception of God as utterly unique and unknowable?

It must be made clear that when Ghazali says that attribution is inadequate, he means this in a specific sense. We have already indicated what Ghazali means by "inadequate": if the words are taken in the meaning they have within the world of man, then the statements are false (and their contradictories are true). Even though attribute words are applied to God, it is only the verbal utterance that is shared not the meaning. This sense of "inadequate" can be stated more clearly in terms of the *function* of attribute-statements as they apply to God. No attribute-statement can have the function of describing God.<sup>1</sup> No language is indicative of His nature. Therefore, when we say "God is powerful" or "God is kind" we cannot be describing God, although the statements are intended and may be classified as statements about God. In other words, the function of those statements is not to inform as when we say of John, "he is strong, yet kind and considerate", from which we learn and are meant to be informed about John's character. So long as the attribute-words are used in the way in which they apply to the objects within man's experience and so long as the attribute-statements are descriptive or informative in function, then all attribution applied to God is inadequate. It only informs man in terms he can understand, but God is above that.

So we must inquire into the nature and function of divine attribution, into the meaning and criteria of its adequacy.

## B. FUNCTION AND GROUND OF ATTRIBUTION

### *Praise as Function*

Just as in the case of the statements 'God is utterly unique' and 'God is utterly unknowable' there is good evidence for maintaining that, according to Ghazali, attribution has a laudatory function, and that praising God is also a ground on the basis of which attributes are chosen.

That praise is a function of attribution may be shown by noting the following.

<sup>1</sup> In a sense these statements are 'descriptive' for they 'describe' God for man, but as we shall see they are not descriptive in the crucial sense that God is not what they say He is, and their function is not to approximate what He is like.

1. Ghazali refers to the revealed attributes, the ones used or mentioned in the Qur'ān (and this applies especially to the well known Ninety Nine Attributes which are called the Names of God)<sup>1</sup> he refers to these attributes *generically* as attributes of praise. Thus he opens a book dedicated to the study of the Ninety Nine Names:

“Praise be to God, unique in His majesty and greatness, alone in His loftiness and eternity, who has cut the mind’s wings beneath the limit of His inaccessible glory, and limited the path of knowing Him to that of not knowing Him. He confined the tongues of the eloquent in praising the beauty of His Presence *to the words of praise He has used of Himself.*”<sup>2</sup>

In the context he is talking about all the Attributes (selected by God for Himself) as attributes of praise, not only about a special group, attributes of praise, among other groups with a different function. For in the *Maqṣad* he is answering a request from someone to discuss the attributes of God. He characterizes the task as extremely difficult, (he also says the results run counter to what the multitude believe!) and says “how can human powers discuss God’s attributes”. Thus the context clearly refers to all the attributes.

2. Then, throughout his mystical works Ghazali repeats the saying of the Prophet who addresses God and says, “I do not count praises unto Thee as Thou hast of Thyself”. Again in the context all the attributes are in mind.

So much for the revealed attributes.

3. Some attributes are or may be given to God which are not revealed to or authorized by the Prophet, and for these the licence is expressed in the following quotation:

“God may be called by His Beautiful Names... and if we go beyond the Names to other attributes, then He may be called by attributes of praise and majesty only.”<sup>3</sup>

4. Then, in one of those rare passages in which Ghazali gives a naturalistic (as distinguished from revealed) account of the origin and basis of divine attribution, he says that those who do not know

<sup>1</sup> The Names of God have no designation in relation to God but only denotation. (*Maq.*, p. 84). However, these Names are meant to be understood by man in his religious practice as if they had their ordinary designation. More will be said on this shortly.

<sup>2</sup> *Maq.*, p. 2; my italics.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3. See also *Ib.* II, 8, *bāb* 1, 2nd *bayān*, p. 248.

that God is above any attributes which cross the mind of man give unto Him what they consider to be their own perfections, like knowledge, power, hearing, vision, will, choice.<sup>1</sup> Their purpose is to praise God.<sup>2</sup>

And in another place he says,

“If there were any perfection in the desire for food and sexual union then these would have been made attributes of God.”<sup>3</sup>

In some of the passages of this nature Ghazali laments the ignorance of “the multitude” in attributing to God their own perfections. From this one may suppose that Ghazali does not himself accept the laudatory interpretation of the function of these attributes. But in fact what he laments is the multitude’s belief that these attributes of praise apply to God as they do to them.

#### *Praise as Criterion*

If, then, attribution has a laudatory function the criterion on the basis of which attributes are selected is also laudatory. If an attribute expresses what by human recognition is praise then it may be used, (or, presumably, has already been used in the Qur'ān), otherwise not. No attribute can be used of Him if it states or implies an insult.<sup>4</sup>

We noted in our last chapter that a statement can praise *and* be genuinely descriptive (or informative). We classified the negative statements, ‘God is utterly unique’ and ‘God is utterly unknowable’ as being both genuinely assertoric—they do assert what is (not) the case about God—and laudatory. But in the case of the positive attribute statements they cannot be informative or descriptive without inconsistency. The believer may intend these statements descriptively and the grammatical form of his utterance may be that of simple des-

<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that the phrase “attribute of praise” covers more than what would be considered praise in parlor conversation. Thus to attribute to God the so-called non-moral perfections like intelligence, hearing, speech, etc., is also to praise God. Even metaphysical perfections, or “compliments” as James calls them, praise God. Thus, for example, according to Ghazali, to be a dependent existent or to have an other of the same rank is not as *perfect* as to be metaphysically independent (or above dependence—still negative) and unique in rank. (*Ib.* III, 8, *shāṭr* 1, 6th *bayān*, p. 243.)

<sup>2</sup> *Maq.*, p. 29.

<sup>3</sup> *Ib.* IV, 9, 2nd *bayān*, p. 366.

<sup>4</sup> *Maq.*, p. 84. See Note 3 p. 104 above.

criptive assertions, but strictly speaking no attribute statements about God can be literal in nature or descriptive in function.<sup>1</sup>

If the function of God-statements cannot be descriptive or informative, the labels *true* or *false* which apply to descriptive statements must be abandoned or their meaning transformed. The question cannot be: Is God such and such? (as when we ask of someone: Is he strong and kind?). The question must be: Does what we say glorify Him? And it seems that Ghazali believes that God is glorified both by attributing to Him the highest perfection man can conceive, and by taking a paradoxical step further and saying, God is even above all that.

If we are to carry these principles to their logical conclusion, then we must abandon the conception of religious language as some kind of supra-empirical description. Religious language should be classified under the heading 'Religious Devotion' or 'Religious Practice' not 'Religious Knowledge', where what is at stake is the glory of God—and as we shall see, the Straightforward Path for man—not what some entity which we do not see is or looks like to the mind's eye.

<sup>1</sup> In interpreting Ghazali's view of the nature and function of religious language one may call such language *analogical* (or symbolic). Several statements in Ghazali's writings indicate that this would not be an incorrect label. To take an example, "All the words mentioned in the languages may not be used with respect to God except by some sort of metaphor (*isti'ārah*) and transference of meaning (*tajawwuz*)." *Ih*. IV, 5, *shāṭr* 1, 2nd *bayān*, p. 220. See also *Ih*. IV, 6, 10th *bayān*, p. 281.

However, if one is to call religious language analogical (or symbolic) it must not be implied that there is any analogy between man and God. Such language, therefore, *creates* analogies but is *not based on* any real analogy or similarity (i.e. the analogies are false). In order to avoid suggesting that there is or can be any analogy between man and God we have refrained from using that label in this essay.

In this connection one must distinguish two levels of analogical talk about God. 1. The physical anthropomorphic references, both the seemingly non-metaphorical ('God has two Hands') and the obviously metaphorical ('God lends his Hand') varieties. 2. Non-physical anthropomorphic references which are usually 'literal' in the sense of being non-metaphorical, but which are analogical in the sense that the words are borrowed from the world of man and applied to God. Thus to speak of God as helping or creating or forgiving is to make an analogy with man, but without metaphor. The latter could be called first level analogical language (regardless of its numbering in this note), and it is what concerns us in this essay. The physical anthropomorphic references belong to the second level since they can be translated into language belonging to the first or ground floor level. Such translation, or giving of the "inner" or "spiritual" meaning, usually goes by the name of *ta'wīl*. The two Hands of God may be taken to symbolize agency or power, and "God lends His Hand" means "God helps".

It follows that to attach the labels "adequate" or "inadequate" to divine attribute statements we do not need first to take a mental peek at some entity in order to find out whether what is asserted is 'true'. In other words, no criterion of adequacy is implied which would conflict with the notion of God as utterly unique and unknowable. This applies to "inadequate" in the sense of *literally false*, as well as to "inadequate" in the now established sense of *insulting*. For in accordance with the former sense, divine attribute statements are declared inadequate<sup>1</sup> a priori, on logical grounds. Unlike the case of the lamp statements, we do not declare God to be unlike other things on the basis of a knowledge of what He is.

The same is true in the case of "inadequate" meaning "insulting". The criterion of adequacy here is whether a statement praises or not. But if attribute statements praise without describing (i.e. adequate in being laudatory, but inadequate if taken for description) then the laudatory criterion cannot conflict with God's uniqueness and unknowability, since it does not inform about God, even though the attribute-statements seem to say that God is such and such.

#### *Different Logical Types*

If positive attribute-statements are laudatory in function without being descriptive then they cannot significantly contradict the statements 'God is utterly unique' and 'God is utterly unknowable'. The two opposing sets of statements differ in their logical type. They perform different functions in discourse.

The negative statements are at the level of concern with what God is like and they make the negative assertions: God is unlike anything in the world of man, and He is, therefore, unknowable to man. Praise statements that do not describe cannot be concerned with nor imply information about *what* a thing is. They extol, glorify, magnify. Praise (or insult) statements are logically compatible with the falsity of the literal descriptive meaning of those same statements. Thus one may call a person a pig (to choose an insult) knowing fully well that the other person is fully human by any biological standard, and knowing equally well that the other person does not eat too much or in a repulsive manner. One may nonetheless wish to accuse (falsely) that a certain person eats like a pig or looks like one.

Furthermore, praise (or insult) statements are logically compatible

<sup>1</sup> The label "adequate" cannot be used under this sense, only "inadequate" can.

with the uniqueness and unknowability of the object praised (or insulted), should such an object be unique and unknowable. Thus one may say, "X is unlike anything I know and is unknowable to me (the continuation of the narrative language must not be deceptive) and X is so powerful and perfect it created the whole world". It must be recalled that the latter part of the sentence ("X is so powerful and perfect") is to be considered descriptively false and is intended as praise.

By showing the compatibility between the positive attribute-statements interpreted as laudatory in function and the uniqueness unknowability statements, we have rejected the third and last assumption necessary for there to be an "incorrigible inconsistency". We have done this by taking licence from Ghazali's principles as to the function and criterion of attribution, but we have used those principles to strengthen Ghazali's position in a way that he himself had not envisaged. We shall repeat the same tactics shortly when we take up another and a more basic function of attribution.

There are yet two points that must be made both of which will lead us to the discussion of the final aim of attribution.

1. By characterizing positive attribute-statements as laudatory but not descriptive one invites the suggestion that these statements must be purely emotive, i.e. pure exclamations of praise and not statements at all. According to this suggestion the utterance 'God is kind' has the same function as the exclamation 'Hail!', and 'God is powerful' the same as 'Glory!'. If such praise utterances were purely emotive one can still give a similar explanation of the compatibility between the attribute-statements and God's uniqueness and unknowability. For with the purely emotive reduction, 'Hail' is of a different logical type from 'God is utterly unique and unknowable', and it cannot significantly contradict it (nor can it be significantly contradicted by any other utterance). Moreover, those positive attribute-sentences cannot even be false, according to the emotive interpretation, since exclamations are not even assertions, and only assertions may be true or false.

This, however, is not the only interpretation of the view that attribute-statements are (a) laudatory, but (b) not descriptive; nor, we assume, would it be Ghazali's choice. We shall maintain shortly that what would be consistent with Ghazali's position is the view that such statements have a special and rather curious classification. They

are intended as assertions about God but cannot be descriptive of God. Their function is practical not cognitive, and in this they differ in type from the negative statements which they seem to contradict. This will be developed more fully when we discuss what Ghazali considers to be the final aim of attribution.

2. While technically there is no contradiction between the laudatory statements and the uniqueness unknowability statements one would certainly wonder why on earth one bothers to sing the praises of an X when one knows nothing about it. It may not be *inconsistent* but it is certainly *odd*. However, it must be remembered that this is not any area of man's life, nor is the X any X. The area is religion, and the X is God.

But why not leave God unique and unknowable, i.e. attributeless? What is the final aim of attribution—granting that it is logically possible? What is the point of telling man about God in language he can understand despite the literal falsity of the language used?

### C. THE FINAL AIM OF ATTRIBUTION

While praise is a function of attribution it is not the only one. Praise is itself part of a more general aim which attribution serves. Praise seems to be made *for God's sake*, so to speak, (initially, at any rate) but the final aim of attribution is *for man's sake*. This final aim is practical, it has to do with man's religious practice not with the exploration of what God is.

Attribution makes religion possible.

"Gazing at the essence of God produces perplexity, bewilderment and confusion of mind. The correct thing is not to venture on the contemplation of God's essence or His attributes... Even the little that theologians have proclaimed: That God is above place and direction, is neither in the world nor outside it, neither linked with the world nor separated from it—this talk has perplexed the minds of many so they denied it (this talk), and would not bear hearing it or understanding it. Some could not even bear less than that, for they were told that God is too great and lofty to have a head, feet, hands, eyes, and organs... If a fly had reason (to understand what is said to it) and was told your creator has neither wings, nor hands, nor feet, nor does He fly, it would have denied that. For this reason God revealed to some



of his prophets: *Do not inform my worshipers about my attributes for they would deny me, tell them about me in what they can understand.*<sup>1</sup>

Also,

“The purpose of... attribution is to give some idea (*‘ibām*) or analogy which nonetheless is false (*tashbīb khaṭa*), to cause to understand (*tashīm*) and (to give) shared names... Thus if someone says how does God know things, we say to him as you know things; and if he says how is God powerful we say as you are powerful (or capable). If God had an attribute or characteristic the like of which we do not have or if we have no name like the name for that characteristic...it would be absolutely inconceivable for us to understand it, for one knows oneself first and then compares the attributes of God<sup>2</sup> with one’s own.”<sup>3</sup>

And as if to remind us that such attributes cannot be taken as descriptive of what God is, he concludes the passage saying:

“May God’s attributes be lofty and exalted above any likeness to our own. This knowledge is, therefore, inadequate... and it must be rejoined always with an absolute denial of similarity while acknowledging a sharing in name.”<sup>4</sup>

To be able to understand God in our language cannot have the aim of knowing what God is, but to understand in order to believe, to worship, and to live righteously.

That the final goal of attribution is practical for man’s sake not descriptive with respect to God, is also evidenced in Ghazali’s important and, in my view, sorely neglected book, *Al-Maṣṣad al-Asna*.

<sup>1</sup> *Ih.* IV, 9, 3rd *bayān*, p. 370; my italics. This corroborates what he says in a reference already noted (*Maq.*, p. 2, “Revealing the truth about this would contradict what the multitude believes.”)

<sup>2</sup> Ghazali, speaking here in orthodox mood, implies that God *does have attributes* the names for which happen to be in our language and which we understand in our own way, while in this essay we have spoken of Ghazali’s God as attributeless in being unique and unknowable. Actually the difference is verbal. God is attributeless in the sense that *for man* no attributes he can understand are descriptive of Him. If Ghazali wishes to insist that God does have attributes, only no man can know them, and only the names happen to be familiar, then we should not quarrel with him. The only use we can find for them is the assurance they give to the believer that God is not ‘nude’, so to speak. Otherwise, God Himself has no use for such attributes expressed in human language, and man has no use for them unless he can understand them in his own terms. Another reason, other than assurance for the believer, may be that Ghazali accepted the set of revealed attributes from the Qur’an and accepted the doctrine of their utter difference (and our point is that as far as human understanding is concerned this in net effect makes God attributeless) but Ghazali did not want to associate himself with the *mu‘ṭilah*, those who denied any attributes to God.

<sup>3</sup> *Maq.*, p. 21.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*.

In this book Ghazali seeks to explain the final goal in knowing what God’s attributes are. This final goal is to acquire the character of God. This is the aspect of the mystical goal we discussed in our second chapter under the name of *qurb*. So while the attributes as known to man are a failure as a descriptive indication of God, the final goal in picturing God as having them is as an ideal for man to approximate in one’s life.<sup>1</sup>

Ghazali expresses this licence in interpreting the final goal of attribution (including revealed attributes) in the following explicit words which he writes after stressing the utter otherness of God.

“And what appeared of these words (the attribute-words) in the Qur’an should be explained in terms of their fruits and goals not their meaning or etymology.”<sup>2</sup>

This is consonant with the whole spirit or “genius” of Islam which it is said is law not theology. Here is how one writer on Islam expresses the same thought.

“The revelation is conceived of, not as a communication of the Divine Being, but only of the Divine Will. It is a revelation, that is, of law not of personality. God the revealer remains Himself unrevealed. The Qur’an is a guidance for mankind. It brings that which men need to know in order to relate themselves to God... There remains beyond the revelation the impenetrable mystery of the Divine. What the revelation does is to give men to know how God wills that men should live. It has a practical intent.”<sup>3</sup>

### *Different Logical Types*

We have already noted that the unique unknowable statements may be classified as assertions which are intended to deny that something is the case about God. In addition to being laudatory they are genuinely addressed to the question: What is God? Can we know Him? They can be classified as belonging to a cognitive religious discourse on God. In their laudatory function they are the product of religious zeal, although as pure negations they cannot be said to be conducive to worship.

But the positive attribute-statements belong to a different clas-

<sup>1</sup> Ghazali as a theist conscious of his orthodoxy would not go as far as Santayana did and declare God merely *the symbol* for man’s highest ideals, but were he less bound to his orthodox theism might he have said it?

<sup>2</sup> *Ma.*, p. 197.

<sup>3</sup> Cragg, *op. cit.*, pp. 47-48.

sification. We have already pointed out that they are not purely emotive. For they are not merely utterances of praise like 'Hail!'. Their function is not just to praise God. They must help man to worship and live righteously or follow the Straightforward Path. They do this by making statements about God (His Nature and His Will). As to their logical type, these are assertions, not exclamations, although they are false if they are to be treated as divine *description*. Such assertions about God may be understood by man in his own terms.<sup>1</sup> They thus have *communication value*.<sup>2</sup> Purely emotive utterances are not assertions and have no communication value. A believer cannot worship God and lead a righteous life if one were only to say to him, "God, Hail! Glory!". He would respond differently if one says, "God is powerful and kind; He created the Heavens and the Earth; He has a Will, He is knower, hearer, etc. Worship Him and follow His Law." And it is made clear to the believer that God's power, kindness, knowledge, etc. are meant to be understood in human terms (to make religion possible). Moreover, if the believer can take it<sup>3</sup> he would be told that these attribute-statements while they may be understood in human terms, as such they are false if they are taken as descriptive of God, and they can be false—unlike pure emotive utterances—since they are classifiable as assertions.

By classifying the positive attribute-statements as assertions about God it may seem as if we consider them to be of the same type as the unique unknowable statements, and thus the one set of statements could contradict the other. But if we go beyond this initial classification and compare their respective functions as assertions it would be clear how the two differ in their type.

The unique unknowable statements are intended (apart from praise) as a response to a question about God's nature and attributes. They may be classified as negative informational.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, the

<sup>1</sup> "Thus if someone says how does God know things, we say to him as you know things; and if he says how is God powerful we say as you are powerful (or capable)." *Maq.*, p. 21.

<sup>2</sup> For the view that religious utterances have communication value but no descriptive value, I am indebted to Crombie, *The Socratic* No. 5, "Theology and Falsification". The similarity between Ghazali and Crombie on this point is striking. Hence Crombie's distinction between communication and descriptive value is at home as well as useful in an analysis of Ghazali's religious philosophy.

<sup>3</sup> "Prophets cannot talk to people except by analogies for they were asked to address people in the measure of their (the people's) understanding." *Ih.* IV, 1, *rukn* 2, 2nd *bayān*, p. 21.

<sup>4</sup> The word "informational" is used here as a neutral label of classification in the way the word "heat" is used to cover hot and cold. We are not contradicting

positive attribute-statements are not informational in relation to God's nature, nor can they be. Ordinarily positive attribute-statements when the subject is other than God can perform two or more jobs at the same time including the descriptive informative one. But when God is the subject, then all positive attribute-statements have lost their chance to be informative about God. They have lost their God-directed informative function. Their *raison d'être* and the justification of their career is now in their practical man-directed function. They continue to be assertions about God. But when God is the point of reference they are always descriptively false. When man is the frame of reference then they communicate to him a picture of God he can understand and one which can guide him in his religious life. This is their communication value and their practical intent. Yet they cannot have communication value unless they are "about God", unless they say God is such and such. Now there are two ways in which a statement can be "about God". One is about God and *descriptively God-directed*. The other is about God, seems to be descriptive and informative, but what it says about God is *man-directed*. It is God-directed only *in transit*. Such is the case with the divine positive attribute-statements.

In conclusion, therefore, we would say that the unique unknowable statements are (in their non-praise function) theoretical informational, albeit negatively, and as such their final target is God. On the other hand, the positive attribute-statements are intended for their effect on man's life. They are practical, for man's sake. They are not God-directed description; they cannot be. The two sets of statements perform different linguistic functions, they belong to different types of discourse. The one, therefore, cannot significantly contradict the other.

This completes the rejection of the charge against Ghazali (and perhaps other Muslim thinkers like him) of contradiction whenever he makes positive attribute-assertions about what he declares to be a unique unknowable God. We have just shown that the third and last assumption for there to be a contradiction—namely, that the affirmation and the denial belong to the same type of discourse—is not made by Ghazali.

what we said earlier that these negative statements do not inform. These statements may be called informational not for being informative or for dispelling our ignorance. Rather they belong to discourse which seeks to answer the informational type of question, "What is the nature of God?"

*Major Summary*

The first of the four problems raised in this essay concerned the possibility of self-contradiction in the very assertion of the uniqueness and unknowability of God. In Chapter Five we showed that there is no such contradiction since in making the laudatory negative a priori assertions at issue no previous knowledge of what God is like is either implied or needed.

In this chapter we answered the second and third of our main problems. The second problem, on the logical possibility of knowing and comparing an unknowable and unique God, was discussed in terms of the third which concerns the logical possibility of any attribution whatsoever. We permitted ourselves to make this reduction after showing that for Ghazali the knowledge of God is a case of knowing what may be said of Him. To show that attribution is logically possible is also to show that 'knowledge' is logically possible. Or, to put it differently, since the knowable aspect is the set of authorized attributes, to show that the use of such attributes is logically possible is to show that the knowable aspect is logically possible.

We showed that since, according to Ghazali, the positive statements are declared to be descriptively false, what they imply, that God is knowable and comparable, is also false. And this conclusion is compatible with the truth of the uniqueness unknowability assertions. We also showed that the latter assertions are God-directed, and that their function is informational though negative. On the other hand the positive attribute-statements are man-directed and are about God only in transit. Their function is practical not descriptive or informational. Thus the negative and positive sets of statements are logically compatible.

We turn now to our fourth and last problem, the problem of Revelation. Here we have two problems on our hands. The first concerns the logical possibility of Revelation as a literal descriptive concept. The second is the problem, for the believer, of having a picture of God which is not indicative of His nature. We shall begin with the latter, for a discussion of it will lead us to the former.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

## THE PROBLEM OF REVELATION

## A. THE BELIEVER AND THE INADEQUATE PICTURE OF GOD

*The Problem*

Ghazali, as we have interpreted him, seems to be saying, that positive attribute-statements assert that God is such and such, but He is *not actually so*. Although we say God is just, forgiving, merciful, yet in a strict sense God is not. As descriptions of God these are false, yet they are what we should accept about Him. Such are the attributes in terms of which the believer is to characterize God, although they are not descriptively true characterizations.

Man is therefore left to worship God in a human language version of Him which is descriptively inapplicable to Him. Man, it seems, is being told: believe in God *as if* He were like this. It is probably more tolerable for a believer to settle for an utterly unique and unknowable God than to settle for an understandable but descriptively inadequate version of Him—consistent as this version may be with the belief that He is utterly unique and unknowable.

*How Genuine a Problem?*

It may be argued that the above problem is not a genuine one. It arises only because of an unjustified expectation, and when this is realized the problem should arise no longer.

One might maintain that the expectation that religious language is or should be descriptive continues to intrude where it does not belong. No one would be disturbed to learn that commands or guidance rules, as such, have no descriptive function. The very question of a descriptive function there is irrelevant. It would be improper to expect a rule guiding action to tell us what anything *is like*, for it is

supposed to direct us on *what to do* and *how to do* it. Similarly, one might contend, religious language in so far as its function is practical cannot be blamed for failing to be descriptive. God revealed His Will not His Nature. How can one score the statements which are supposed to express His Will for doing a half-hearted job in revealing His Nature? Is not this like blaming a pencil for being such a poor hammer? One could say that the believer is asked to accept a picture of God which is supposed to guide his religious-ethical life. Why should one complain that such a picture does not reveal God's Nature? Why should it? Briefly, then, it may be said that if religious statements are supposed to be practical and man-directed, it is hardly their failing not to be God-directed description.

Before we discuss this any further let us comment on a related difficulty that could arise because of the same mistaken expectation.

#### *Islam and "Theology"*

That Islam is essentially law not theology may be noted by someone purely as a description. But suppose someone else were to seize on the non-descriptive interpretation of Islamic divine attribute-statements and turn the fact into a criticism, as follows. "If by 'theology' one means 'an inquiry into the existence, nature, and actions of God resulting in God-directed descriptive statements', then Ghazali, or more generally Islam, has and can have no theology."

Given the view of the non-descriptive function of religious language—let us for the purpose of this discussion refer to it as the Islamic view—this criticism becomes like the complaint that the pencil is not nor can be used as a hammer. Furthermore, we need to add that what we are referring to as the Islamic view should be understood as a view which applies to the language of any religion not only to Islam. In other words, it is an Islamic philosophy of *religion* not only of Islam. Even though Ghazali and other Muslim thinkers like him were historically and consciously preoccupied with Islam—rather typically—what they had to say about Islam is true of it *as a religion*. By implication this extends its application to any religion.

The bearing of this is that the hypothetical critic under discussion cannot claim immunity from the reaches of the Islamic view. If no theology is possible in Islam, and if the Islamic view of religion is correct—we are not necessarily assuming here that it is—then no

theology is possible in any other religion either. Just because a non-Muslim, or another Muslim with a different interpretation, claims he has a theology in the sense indicated, it does not mean that he necessarily has a correct conception of the nature of his own religious language. Our hypothetical critic *cannot* say: "Ghazali and other Muslims are telling us about Islam. However, in such and such a non-Muslim religion, or religions, religious language is conceived to have a descriptive God-directed function, therefore, theology is possible there." For as we are raising the issue, it is one of philosophic validity of one or another of alternative interpretations of religious language. It is not an issue of comparative religious fact, not an issue of what claims have in fact been made in one religion or another, by one person or another.

The philosophies of religious language under discussion—the descriptive as against the non-descriptive—which are here made the criteria for the legitimate application or non-application of the label "theology", are not records of the progress someone or another has made in some cultural or religious journey. They are interpretations of a point commonly reached. If A says, "My creed reveals God's Will but not His Nature", and B says, "Mine reveals both", the two differ in their interpretation of the same type of language, perhaps even of identical statements, not in how far each has glimpsed of God. That God is unknowable is common to all religions, and as a consequence, the same considerations discussed in this essay in connection with Ghazali's thought should in the case of other religious thought also lead away from the classification of religious language as descriptive of God.<sup>1</sup> Theology in the sense indicated here is not possible for any religion.

It would be absurd in the extreme, therefore, for anyone to discuss the issue of whether Islam has a theology or not as a question of success or failure in Divine exploration. As if, for some reason, Islam (or Judaism for that matter) did not have enough thrust and only got as far as God's Will.

On the other hand it would be completely unnecessary for anyone to respond 'defensively' to what he might consider the 'charges' of our hypothetical critic. Settling for God's Will has nothing to do

<sup>1</sup> The relation between the unknowability of God and the non-descriptive function of religious language is clearly and forcefully argued in Stace's *Time and Eternity*. His positive interpretation of the nature of religious language, however, is different from the one stated here in our analysis of Ghazali's thought.

with spiritual or intellectual fatigue, just as claiming to know His Nature and to have a theology has nothing to do with divine navigational competence. The two contrasting positions are different interpretations of the nature and function of religious (theistic) language, not reports of cultural achievement. It should be remarked that there are many in Western thought who advance the interpretation of religion—of any religion—which we have here for convenience called Islamic.

Now to return to the believer's problem in having a picture of God which is not indicative of His nature.

#### *Religious Language, Commands, and Description*

We have suggested that the dissatisfaction with the failure of the human language picture of God to be descriptive of Him may be explained away as due to an improper expectation. But the matter cannot be dismissed that simply. For why is it more relevant—or less irrelevant—to raise the question of descriptive failing with religious language than with commands?

On the surface one might say that the grammatical form of a command unlike that of a divine positive attribute-statement is not that of an assertion, and descriptions are at least assertions. The form 'God is kind' makes it natural for one to ask, "Is that true?"; whereas it makes no sense to ask of a command such as 'Sit down', whether it describes accurately or not. But this consideration is neither necessary nor sufficient. For the utterance 'You are sitting down', properly intonated, could be a command, even though its form is that of a descriptive assertion. Thus one cannot judge meaning by grammatical form.

Another suggestion is more plausible. No set of rules guiding action—regardless of the grammatical form in which they appear—can do without either explicit or implicit descriptive statements. A traffic law such as 'Drive on the right side of the street', implies at least the descriptive distinction between the right and the left side of a street. A religious sermon—a particular use of religious language in which the guidance function is often most obvious—could not be constructed without explicit or implicit descriptions. 'Repent your sins' is usually followed by 'For God punishes, yet is merciful'. Now it is possible to say, as we have said in interpreting Ghazali, that statements like 'God punishes' or 'God is merciful' have a practical function. Let us say they induce man to repent, and inspire him

to be merciful himself. Anyone who utters these statements may at a certain time, or even most of the time, not intend to describe God but merely to guide the listener, or to rededicate himself to a course of action. But is it possible that at no point in their career would such statements drop a descriptive anchor in God? More importantly, *for their very practical function could they be effective* if they did not at some point also have a descriptive function? Would the believer mind his moral action if he did not believe that it is descriptively true of God that He punishes yet is merciful?

#### *The Alternative to Descriptive Adequacy*

The persistent assumption behind the above suggestion is that the only conception of an *adequate* religious utterance is in terms of *descriptive* adequacy. From our study of Ghazali we have seen that such a kind of adequacy is logically impossible so long as God is said to be utterly unknowable. Yet religious practice requires some assurance that the things said about God are in some sense true.

There are two possible ways out for Ghazali, both of which are suggested by his thought. They could be adopted together or singly. First, one could insulate the 'multitude' of believers, or assume that they would naturally be insulated, from the philosophic sophistications necessary for a consistent agnosticism. For many religious believers the philosophic problems discussed in this essay are not part of their religious horizon. This insulation is due to a lack of access. But even if the multitude were exposed they might still be unable or unwilling to see the relevance of the philosophic difficulties. This is insulation by aversion. In any case whether by design or by natural course the multitude are left with the simple understanding that God is literally what it is said He is. This 'resolves' the problem only in the sense that the conditions for its occurring are not met. The problem could still arise for anyone aware of the problem of the unknowability of God, and the need for and the existence of 'description' (the positive attribute-statements), and aware of the descriptive inadequacy of that 'description', and the need for a guarantee of the truth—in some sense of truth—of the 'description'.

The second possible solution lies in offering a notion of religious truth or correctness which is non-descriptive yet well-founded, well-guaranteed. The believer aware of the philosophic problems still needs a guarantee that the picture he has of God, if not descriptively true, is nonetheless the right, the correct one to believe.

It would not do for us here to make use of the notion of correctness or adequacy developed in Chapter Seven. As an alternative to descriptive adequacy we discussed there Ghazali's view that an attribute-statement may be called adequate if it praises God and guides man in his religious ethical life. But, those criteria are criteria for justifying religious statements in general, including but not only the specific statements of the Muslim Creed. Yet the Muslim is offered a *particular* creed not general criteria for selecting his own creed. To him it is said "...so long as you accept *these* items of faith", not "...so long as you stay within these criteria for selecting *a* creed". Thus we need an additional basis, and a crucial one, in order to *assure* the believer, epistemologically and religiously, that *this* creed is the correct one to believe in spite of the descriptive inadequacy of its assertions. If one is found then the believer should cease to be concerned that the picture he has of God is descriptively inadequate, for it would be adequate in a new sense. It would be *authoritative*.

It should be clear what we are heading for. This guarantee we have in mind is by no means new to our discussion. It has already been mentioned as the ultimate and authoritative source of and basis for justifying religious belief, specifically, the items of belief that constitute the Muslim creed. Revelation—and this is what everything is pointing to—will now appear in its most crucial function. It will also suffer a most ironic and paradoxical turn of fate.

## B. IS REVELATION LOGICALLY POSSIBLE?

### *A Familiar 'Difficulty'*

Ghazali would offer the following assurance. God used all the positive attributes about Himself in the Qur'ān. We believe in the Qur'ān as the word of God, so we accept these attribute-statements as authoritative.

Someone might point out, however, that it was also God Himself in the Qur'ān who said of Himself that He is unlike anything else, and this is the very thing that makes all assertions about Him false. But this should no longer cause us any concern, for as we have amply seen, Ghazali's view is that God the unique unknowable has revealed to man a picture of Himself that man can understand, and which can guide his life. Insofar as it is revealed by God it is authoritative and is the correct way to think of (or 'describe') Him, even though it is

descriptively false as far as what God is in Himself and to Himself. In other words there is no logical incompatibility between God's uniqueness and unknowability, on the one hand, and the positive attribute-statements that make up the creed, on the other.

But now we shall witness the logical impossibility shift from the positive *content* of Revelation, to the very *fact* of its occurrence. And we shall see Ghazali in the midst of a dilemma that he cannot resolve without an important sacrifice.

### *The Real Dilemma*

In Chapter Five<sup>1</sup> we pointed out that the belief that God reveals is incompatible with the belief in His unknowability, and this in two ways. First, a direct contradiction, God the unknowable is said to reveal Himself, or something about Himself. Second, an indirect contradiction, in saying that He reveals a certain content about Himself we are in passing, as it were, asserting something about Him—namely, that He reveals. This informs us at least that much<sup>2</sup> about Him. The assertion 'He reveals' has a special status as a positive statement about God. It is a higher order assertion. Although it may be part of the creed—"the creed" here means "the sum total of beliefs about God"—it is the only important statement of the creed which can be made *about* it. Also it can be made about God and the creed at the same time. At any rate in making the assertion we contradict God's utter unknowability.

We have seen that the first inconsistency is unreal, for *what* God reveals is a guide for man and not, strictly speaking, a self-description. We are left with the second inconsistency. If this is a real inconsistency, unlike the previous one, then a most serious consequence follows. The logical possibility of the very concept of revelation, literally and descriptively interpreted, is denied.

To resolve the second inconsistency—namely, God is utterly unknowable but we know He reveals—one could suggest that the statement 'God reveals' be given an analysis similar to the other positive attribute-statements. It too may be considered in the end practical in intent and descriptively false. This would make it logically com-

<sup>1</sup> pp. 90 f.

<sup>2</sup> One might say that it informs more, since by implication will and understanding are also implicitly applied to God. Revelation is a function of these two psychological phenomena. For our discussion, the fact of revelation is all that needs to be taken up.

pretation of religious utterances be extended to the statement 'God reveals'. In such a case the statement could not be a simple report of an event that transpired between two entities, God and a prophet.

For a positive non-literalistic alternative interpretation more than one formula is possible, reflecting the diverse doctrinal alternatives to literalistic theism. One illustration will be given here. The intention is to point in the direction of a type of solution by giving a concrete clarifying instance. We do not wish to offer such a thing as a most defensible possibility, nor to follow through with a discussion of its promise as a solution. We do not claim that what we offer is an original alternative, either.

In point of time the prophet is the first to be in a position to say 'God reveals'.<sup>1</sup> One might say that the immediate function of the statement 'God reveals' is twofold. First, it seeks to reduce, but at the same time to underscore, the sense of mystery that surrounds the source of the prophet's message. The word "God" or "Allah" would be used as a proper name with denotation but no designation.<sup>2</sup> It points beyond the tip of its arrow towards the mystery.<sup>3</sup> Then, the statement as a whole, 'God reveals', is fashioned on the analogy of its counterpart with the human reference: 'Someone disclosed to me such and such'. Second, the statement is the prophet's way of expressing to his fellow men his assurance of the validity of the message. For that he borrows the mode of authoritative disclosure. What he says is to be conceived on the analogy of: 'Someone, who is not to be doubted, said such and such'. Thus the mystery with the sense of 'beyondness' plus the authoritative validity of the message find expression in the statement 'God reveals'. That this statement relies on the analogy of human authoritative disclosure at once reduces the

<sup>1</sup> It is conceivable that a prophet may have a philosophic interpretation of the nature and function of the language in which he expresses his message, including the statement 'God reveals', which is not shared by some of his followers. A person good at some activity is not necessarily the best philosopher of that activity. The artist is not necessarily the best philosopher of art, nor the scientist the best philosopher of science. And the religious man is not necessarily the best philosopher of religion. Thus it should be possible to follow a prophet on the content of a creed, but not its philosophic interpretation. For this to be possible the philosophic statements about the creed should not be included as part of the creed.

<sup>2</sup> "It is a logical characteristic of proper names that they can be intelligibly used without our being able to substitute for them a description of what or whom they refer to." Mc Intyre, in *Metaphysical Beliefs: Three Essays*, Student Christian Movement Press, p. 190.

<sup>3</sup> The creeping of direction terms can be disastrous.

mystery and enables man in his religious practice to respond to the revealed creed somewhat in the way he would to other authoritative pronouncements.

A suggestion of this kind would avoid contradicting the unknowability of God, since in it there is no description of anything that some entity, God, does. Yet one has not stepped outside theistic language to achieve the consistency.<sup>1</sup>

But while consistency would be attained the locus of authority changes from the directness of God's authority to that of the prophet, and in the case of Islam the authority of the Prophet Muhammad. The Prophet would then have to be trusted in a special way for supplying man with a theistic perspective that directs his religious and ethical life.<sup>2</sup>

This shift in the locus of authority is the major sacrifice that Ghazali, or any other Muslim thinker with his basic premises, would have to make if logical consistency is desired. Yet the novel thing about it for Islam is not that the Prophet's words (and his life) are authoritative, for the latter is so very fundamentally Muslim, and is as old as Islam itself. The sacrifice or the change would consist in the recognition that literally speaking it is the Prophet and not God who, with consistency, can be called the authoritative source and guarantor of revealed content. This is not to say that religion becomes a mere human creation. As a matter of fact the alternatives held before us by literalistic theism: either the entity man makes religion or the entity God does—this is woefully inadequate. The religious outlook based on the idea of God as a Cosmic Janitor caring for the needs of the universe and man—and among other things revealing—is crude in the extreme. Ghazali with an exceptionally keen religious insight has gone a long way toward uncovering its crudity. At any rate the shift in authority suggested here is not intended to reduce *religion* to a mere natural human creation, although it may be the case that the

<sup>1</sup> It would have been as easy as it would have been improper for us here to have indulged in the exploration of non-theistic solutions.

<sup>2</sup> This raises an important problem the discussion of which lies outside the set limits of this essay. It is the problem of justifying the *prophet's* use of theistic concepts in general as well as the specific ones he chooses, if the notion of revelation from God is to be non-literally interpreted. We are raising it here, but its discussion would be completely outside Ghazali's thought. The question cannot arise for his thought as it historically stands, and there are no clues in his thought as to how it might have been answered even if it did arise. (See the next note on the question of the authoritativeness of a prophet in general, which is a related but distinct matter).

actual *words* chosen for any particular creed come from human initiative. The words chosen would be considered authoritative because the trusted, and for Ghazali infallible, Prophet has chosen them.<sup>1</sup> This is the guarantee of their believability—for whomever needs a guarantee.

How this shift will affect traditional Islam, and whether it will be acceptable or not to most Muslims, this belongs in a separate discussion. It is likely to be as unacceptable as any untraditional suggestion in any religion. Perhaps there is a way of resolving the dilemma we have presented without sacrificing the literalism of traditional theism. While we doubt the possibility of such a solution there is no reason for us to be closed to recognizing a good solution if one were presented.

In any case many difficulties have in the history of theism 'resolved' themselves at the socio-psychological level rather than at the intellectual level. What the philosopher finds it necessary to maintain seems often to remain isolated from the practice of the religious man. There is more of a permanent gap between the needs of religious thought and the needs of practice than many would care to admit. It may be psychologically impossible to be religious in any traditional sense and not believe in the simple informative God-directed function of religious statements, even of the statement 'God reveals'. Those who recommend the non-literalism usually have the tone of arbitrators. Their voices have the sound of an outsider analyzing for others what should be the logical nature of their religious beliefs. But it is not necessary for a philosopher's interpretation to be acceptable to a religious man, and it is unfair to judge what appeals to one by whether it will appeal to the other. The needs of thought are not the needs of religious practice, and the needs of practice not those of thought.

### C. CONCLUDING SUMMARY

In a concluding paragraph let us summarize two points about Ghazali's thought as it historically stands.

First, there is no contradiction between Ghazali's insistence that God is utterly unique and unknowable and the positive attribute-statements that constitute the creed. The latter are not descriptive with respect to God, but are practical with respect to man.

Second, the inconsistency which remains is between the conception of God as unique and unknowable and the concept of revelation descriptively and literally interpreted. So long as Ghazali maintains these incompatible elements, his dilemma is either to resolve the contradiction by foregoing God's direct authentication of the creed (and perhaps substituting the Prophet's), or to avail himself of such Divine authentication, but create an inconsistency.

<sup>1</sup> Ghazali is aware of the need to show that prophecy exists and that its pronouncements are binding, and to show that one can know a particular person to be a prophet, and that Muhammad in particular is a prophet "in the highest grade". His most available discussion is in the Watt translation of the *Munqidh* pp. 63-68. It is noteworthy how much of Ghazali's defense of the authority of a prophet—and of Muhammad—is independent of the fact that he is the "Messenger of God".



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## INDEXES

## I. INDEX OF ARABIC TERMS

- aḥad 21  
 'aql 53, 55, 56, 68  
 dbawq 43ff., 53, 55, 56, 58, 67, 68, 69,  
 73, 74, 75  
 fanā' 31, 31 n. 1, 34, 34 n. 1  
 fiṭra 56 n. 2  
 bulūl 26, 34 n. 1  
 ibṭāl 8  
 idrāk 46 n. 2  
 ilhām 46 n. 1, 53, 58, 66f.  
 istighbrāq 31, 31 n. 2, 34  
 ittihād 25, 34 n. 1  
 jam' 34, 34 n. 1  
 kashf 46 n. 1  
 lāhūt 21, 21 n. 1  
 mu'āmalah 46 n. 3  
 mukāshafah 46 n. 1, 46 n. 3, 53, 68 n. 2  
 mukbālafah 1, 9, 10, 17, 78, 81  
 mushābadah 46, 46 n. 1  
 mutakallimūn 73 n. 1  
 naql 53, 54, 68  
 nāsūt 21 n. 1  
 qalb 56 n. 1  
 qurb 29 f., 31 n. 1, 33, 34, 34 n. 1, 35,  
 111  
 shirk 97  
 tajsīm 9  
 tanzīb 10, 82 n. 1  
 taqlīd 53, 54, 55, 74  
 taṣawwuf 30 n. 4  
 tashbih 9, 11, 81, 82 n. 1  
 tathbit 9  
 ta'fil 8, 11  
 tawhīd 34 n. 1, 59 n. 3, 70  
 tawhīd (objective), 29, 31f., 33, 35,  
 36, 59 n. 3  
 tawhīd (subjective), 28 n. 1, 29, 30f.  
 31 n. 2, 34, 35, 36  
 ta'wil 9, 57, 106 n. 1  
 wābi 46 n. 1, 53, 58  
 wābid 21  
 wiṣāl 34 n. 1  
 wuṣūl 34 n. 1  
 yaqīn 46, 55, 57 n. 2, 70 n. 1, 73ff.

## II. INDEX OF PROPER NAMES

- al-Ash'ari 10, 11  
 al-Bisṭāmī 28 n. 1  
 Cragg, K. 79, 111 n. 3  
 Crombie, I. M. 112 n. 2  
 Daly, C. B. 123 n. 2  
 Ewer, M. A. 45 n. 3  
 al-Fārābī 11  
 Gairdner, W. H. T. 9 n. 3, 35 n. 3,  
 43 n. 2, 46 n. 2, 63 n. 1, 78, 81  
 al-Hallāj 21 n. 1, 28 n. 1  
 Ḥanbalites 9  
 Hume, D. 23 n. 1  
 Ibn ul-'Arabi 10  
 Ibn ul-Ḥakam 9 n. 1  
 Ibn Ḥanbal 9 n. 4, 10  
 Ibn Ḥazm 8  
 Ibn Rushd 11  
 Ibn Sīnā 11  
 Jabre, F. 67 n. 3, 78 n. 2  
 Jacobites 27  
 Jahm Ibn Ṣafwān 8, 8 n. 3  
 Jesus Christ 27, 81, 82, 88  
 Karrāmites 9  
 Kierkegaard, S. 123 n. 2  
 Macdonald, D. B. 23 n. 1, 79, 80ff.  
 McIntyre, A. 124 n. 2  
 Muhammad, The Prophet 8, 54, 55  
 n. 1, 58, 68, 68 n. 1, 72, 80, 104, 125,  
 126, 126 n. 1, 127  
 Mu'tazilites 7, 10, 11  
 Nicholson, R. 21 n. 1, 28 n. 1  
 Nyberg, H. S. 10 n. 1  
 Obermann, J. 29 n. 1  
 Otto, R. 15 n. 1, 21 n. 1, 82 n. 3  
 Philosophers, The 10, 11, 57, 123  
 n. 1  
 Rahman, F. 123 n. 1  
 Santayana, G. 111 n. 1  
 Smith, M. 10 n. 2  
 Smith, W. C. 26 n. 3  
 Stace, W. T. 6, 15 n. 1, 24 n. 1, 117  
 n. 1, 123 n. 2  
 Strothman, R. 8 n. 2, 9 n. 1  
 Sufis 10, 11

- Watt, W. M. 43 n. 2, 46 n. 3, 78  
 Wensinck, J. 28 n. 2, 43 n. 2, 63  
 n. 1  
 Wittgenstein, L. 43, 71 n. 1  
 Zāhirites 9

## III. SUBJECT INDEX

- agnosticism (see also God's unknow-  
 ability) 21f., 35 n. 3, 37ff., 39 n. 2,  
 47ff., 53, 76, 98, 119  
 angels 59, 60, 63, 66f., 90  
 anthropomorphism 8, 9, 57, 81, 82  
 n. 1, 106 n. 1  
 attributes, see God's Attributes  
 attribution 8, 11  
   function and aim 48, 95f., 103ff.,  
   108, 109ff.  
   ground 102, 103ff.  
   inadequacy 53, 64, 91, 101ff., 115ff.  
   logical possibility 107ff., 114  
   logical type 39, 95ff., 107ff., 111ff.  
 cause 19 n. 1, 29, 29 n. 4, 41 ff., 46  
 certainty 46, 54, 72ff.  
 God's, Acts 49, 50ff., 76  
   Attributes 7f., 10, 18, 30, 39, 49,  
   50ff., 66, 75, 76, 104, 109f.  
   definability 40ff., 49, 75  
   difference, (see also God's uniqueness)  
   1, 9, 15ff., 20, 21, 48, 81, 82, 97f.  
   divine nature 21, 27, 47 n. 1, 60, 97f.  
   Essence 8, 10, 26, 40, 41f., 47, 49, 51,  
   66, 75, 76, 87  
   existence 41f., 50f., 63  
   knowable aspect 24, 39, 49, 50ff.,  
   62ff., 75, 84, 89, 114  
   oneness 21, 83, 84 n. 1, 85, 97f, 100  
   n. 1  
   transcendence 80ff.  
   uniqueness 1, 3f., 13ff., 18ff., 27, 28,  
   35, 36, 40, 60, 61, 76, 84 n. 1, 89, 91  
   94ff.  
   unknowable aspect 37ff., 65, 76  
   unknowability 1, 3f., 21f., 35, 36,  
   37ff., 40, 43, 53, 60, 61, 75, 76, 89,  
   91, 98ff., 117, 121ff.  
 identification (with God) 26, 28, 57  
 Incarnation 6, 26, 27, 81  
 infinite 10, 11, 12, 63 n. 1, 84, 86ff.  
 intuition, see mystical intuition  
 Islam 1, 2, 4, 5, 7, 11, 27, 61, 64, 79,  
 79 n. 1, 81 n. 1, 84, 86f., 97, 111,  
 116f., 122ff.  
 mystical, confrontation 59ff., 62ff.,  
 69  
   experience 43ff.  
   goal 4, 22, 28, 28 n. 2, 29ff., 35, 60  
   intuition 44, 47, 53, 56, 58, 59, 69,  
   72  
   knowledge 58ff., 67  
   "mystical" and "mysticism" (as  
   labels) 68ff.  
   union 11f., 22, 23ff., 32ff., 60, 84  
 necessary existence 19, 20, 29 n. 4., 40,  
 41f., 100  
 Neoplatonic 10, 59, 78, 78 n. 2  
 pantheism 6, 10, 11, 33, 52, 70 n. 1,  
 81, 83ff.  
 prophecy 45, 47 n. 2, 124ff., 125 n. 1  
 Qur'ān, The 8, 10, 11, 18 n. 2, 51, 54,  
 55, 57, 99, 104, 105, 110 n. 2, 111,  
 120, 122  
 reason 53, 55, 56ff.  
 religious language, analogical 106 n. 1,  
 112 n. 3  
   and commands 115f., 118f.  
   communication value 112f, 122  
   descriptive (or non-descriptive) 11,  
   89, 103 n. 1, 105, 108, 109ff., 115ff.,  
   127  
   emotive 96, 108, 112  
   God-directed 109, 110, 113, 114,  
   116, 117, 122, 126  
   honorific (or laudatory) 48, 95f.,  
   103ff., 107ff., 111, 120  
   literal (or non-literal) 11, 119, 121,  
   122f., 124, 125, 126  
   man-directed 109, 110, 113, 114,  
   116, 122  
   practical 106, 109ff., 114, 116ff.,  
   121, 122, 127,  
   symbolic 106 n. 1  
 Revelation 2, 5, 53, 54, 56, 57, 58  
 59, 64, 66 n. 2, 67 f., 72ff., 75, 90f.  
 114, 120ff.  
 self 52f.  
 theology 116ff.  
 Trinity, The 83, 84, 86, 87ff.